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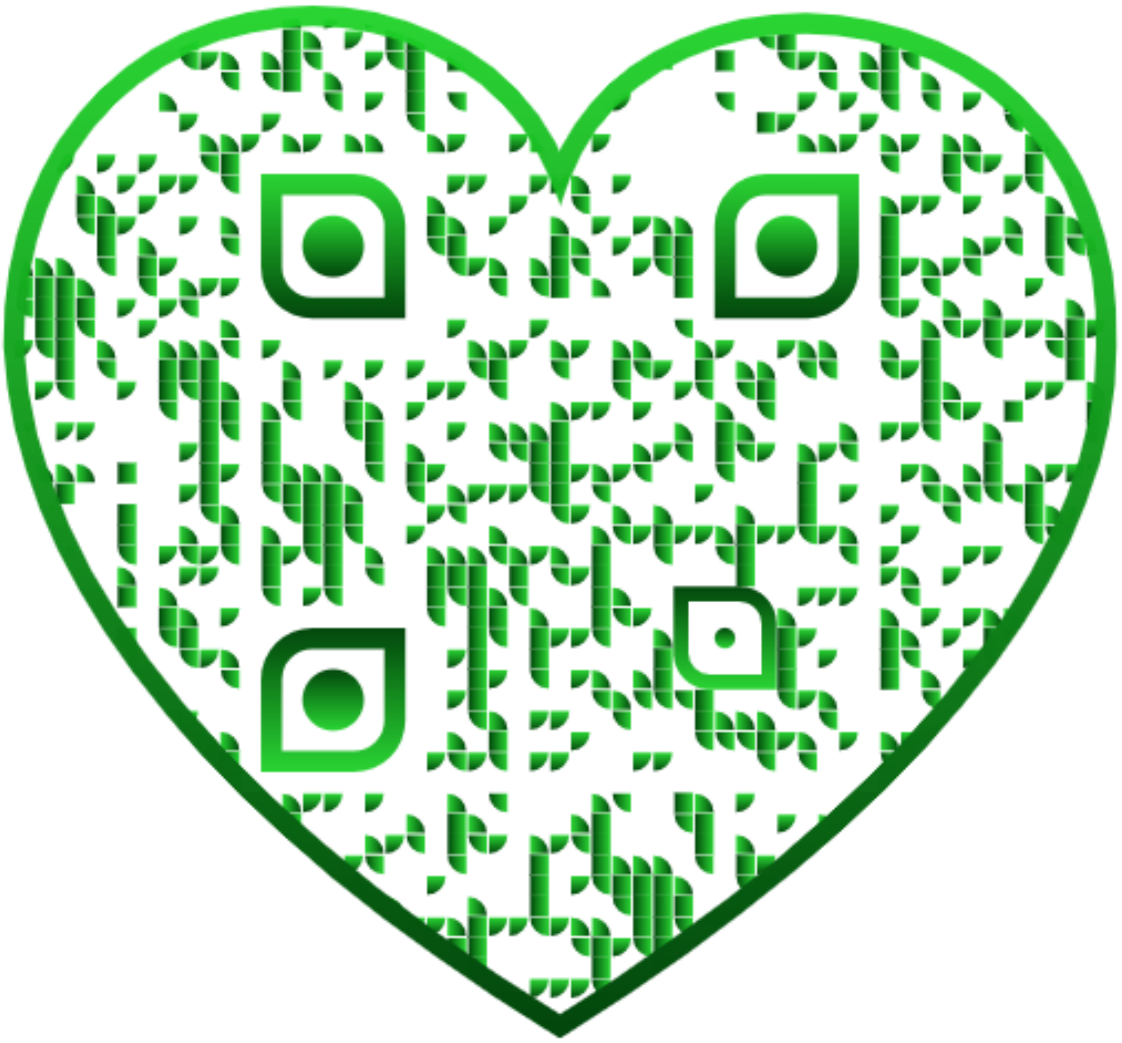

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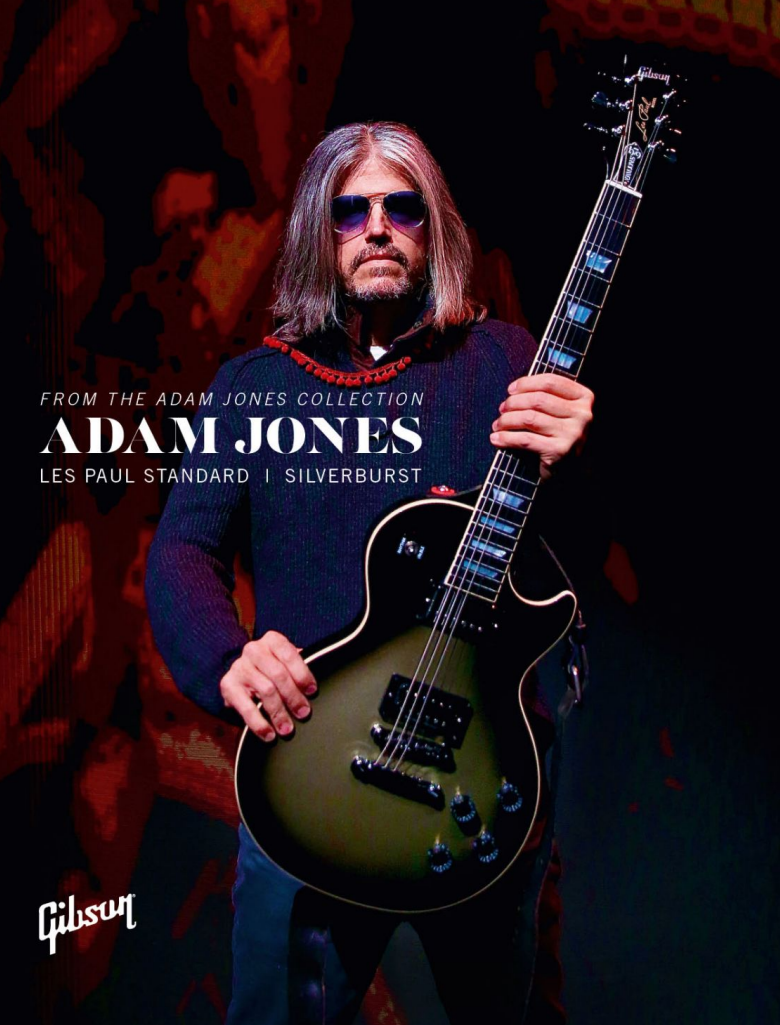
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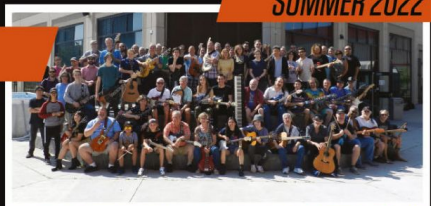

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GUITARISTS. DAVID BOWIE could pick them. His catalog is filled with the work of greats like Earl Slick, Carlos Alomar, Robert Fripp, Reeves Gabrels, Adrian Belew, Nile Rodgers, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Peter Frampton, David Torn and Ben Monder. But might any of those alliances have happened at all were it not for Mick Ronson?

The guitarist from Hull's impact on Bowie's career has been well documented. Ronson was the first of his collaborators whose talents were equal to his own, if different by nature. In Ronson, Bowie had a guitarist, pianist, arranger and musical foil who could give shape, form and massive guitar tone to his musical creations, turning them into hits and, fair to say, cultural movements. Ronno's distinctive work on Bowie's early 1970s output remains for me some of that era's most expressive and memorable guitar playing. If I could point to a favorite moment, I would choose the solo in *Aladdin Sane*'s "Time," with its feral whammy-bar horse neighing and guitar-symphony harmonies, elements that bring to mind the work of, respectively, Eddie Van Halen and Brian May, who followed Ronson. After Bowie split with Ronno, no guitarist would play as long and vital a role in his music for decades, until he teamed with Gabrels in Tin Machine and beyond in the 1990s. His career suffered not at all from Ronson's absence, nor should it have. Constant reinvention was the cog that drove Bowie's career and lifetime of success.

Ronson, on the other hand, remains best known for his work with the glam-rock icon, despite making significant contributions elsewhere, including on Lou Reed's *Transformer*, Morrissey's *Your Arsenal*, and *American Fool*, John Mellencamp's 1982 breakthrough album. "I owe Mick Ronson the hit song 'Jack & Diane,'" Mellencamp declared to *Sound on Sound* in 2008, referring to the *American Fool* cut that put his career on firm footing. "Mick was very instrumental in helping me arrange that song, as I'd thrown it on the junk heap… All of a sudden, for 'Jack & Diane,' Mick said, 'Johnny, you should put baby rattles on there…

"So he put the percussion on there, and then he sang the part, 'Let it rock, let it roll' as a choir-ish-type thing, which had never occurred to me. And that is the part everybody remembers on the song. It was Ronson's idea."

In this issue, we attempt to give the brilliant guitarist his long-overdue due, courtesy of remembrances from producer/engineer Ken Scott, producer/musician Tony Visconti, Morrissey and others whose careers and music bear his imprint.

Chris Gill

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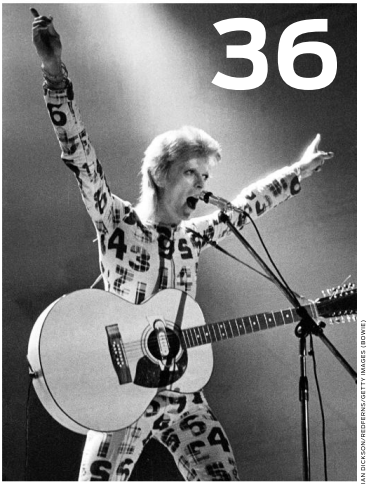

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ON THE COVER
David Bowie and Mick Ronson, July 3, 1973, by Chalkie Davies/Getty Images

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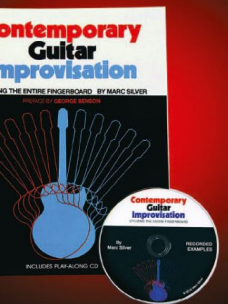

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ARTFUL SELECTION

With the Telstar, Gene Baker's b3 Guitars delivers the best of the Big F's top two timeless models.

BY DAVE HUNTER

GENE BAKER'S CAREER is the stuff of legend. After apprenticing under fabled luthier Roger Giffin, head of Gibson's West Coast Custom Shop, for two years, he moved to the Fender Custom Shop in Corona in 1993, during its "Golden Age," where he quickly rose to the position of senior master builder. In 2003, he launched b3 Guitars, bringing his own fully custom models to players. Through it all, Baker has continually garnered respect for blending original and forward-looking esthetics with a clear respect for classic elements in models that include his custom-grade SL, Phoenix, UltraModern and Ringmaster.

These models returned to the market with the opening of Baker's new workshop in Tehachapi, California, in January 2020, with promotional and administration support from his business partner, guitar-industry veteran Michael Brandt Rinkenberger. Now they're joined by his latest creation: the Telstar, a clever 50/50 marriage of the Big F's two most timeless models.

First developed by Baker in 2009 for another project, and thoroughly updated and upgraded for 2022, the Telstar has a body carved to the iconic S-style curves on its bass side, with a slab-bodied T-style creation on the treble side. The four-bolt neck attachment and 25 ½–inch scale length suit both inspirations, of course, but pickups are split between S-style single-coils in the neck and middle positions and a slightly fatter T-style in the bridge, with 10-position switching and a clever vibrato unit that blends the bridge archetypes from both models. And for all that, as simple as the splicing might seem, the final result represents much more than the sum of its parts.

"The concept, to us, has always been that a T-style sits in your lap better for tracking at a DAW," Baker says. "Its flat bottom just stays in place well, whereas the S-style is far more comfortable on the top side. And when you look at pickups, the T bridge is meatier by design, and we feel that it's the heart of a great T model, getting close to a good P-90 vibe even. But one cannot live without the combination tones of the three pickups found on any great S model."

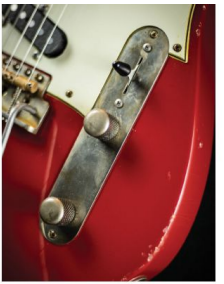
PHOTOS COURTESY OF B3 GUITARS

The idea to modify either model or both isn't revolutionary, but the possibilities available are vast. "These models have been such a long part of hot-rodded guitar tradition that the format is rather wide open for all it can be," Baker affirms. "So for us, it was about starting with a body shape that is basically set in stone, and doing a 50/50 split. Then everything in between is 'anything goes' — from hardtail to tremolo to most any pickup configuration. And we feel what we have brought to the table combines the best of every option we could muster in one package."

"WE FEEL WHAT WE HAVE BROUGHT TO THE TABLE COMBINES THE BEST OF EVERY OPTION WE COULD MUSTER IN ONE PACKAGE"

If the 50/50 body shape is "set in stone," as Baker says, he has still found plenty of ways to wedge in the boutique-grade build quality that he has long been known for, and a deep reconsideration of how these guitars are put together can be found at virtually every turn. The guitar in hand sports a body made of solid alder and features a lightly to medium-distressed Dakota Red finish, one of a number of Fullerton-inspired custom colors b3 is using on the series. The neck is carved from an appealing chunk of flamed maple with a rosewood fretboard and 22 immaculately crowned and polished stainless-steel frets. It has a beefy "V" profile that measures around .91 inches at the first fret and .98 inches at the 12th. That might sound a tad hefty to some players, but it's so comfortable in the hand that I had to double-take the measurements to be sure I wasn't off. The two are joined by an offset neck plate engraved with the b3 logo and rounded to match the curve of the contoured heel, a nice piece of woodworking that really aids upper-fret access. At the other end, the headstock is what we might call a "fat-T" inspired shape, with aged Kluson-style tuners and a Telstar logo that playfully adopts the iconic spaghetti font.

"I figured if we're going to release this, we have to do it in a way that makes improvements on the model, otherwise we're no better than anyone else," Bakers tells us of the extra effort in evidence throughout the build. "We make everything in-house, and to me the neck is always the soul of the guitar, because it's what you feel the most. These necks and bodies cannot be ordered from any outsourced suppliers. I also think a truss



rod needs to be basically a 'set it and forget it' scenario, and we wanted to maintain a vintage heel-adjust look. We've been adding graphite to all our instruments' necks for a few beneficial reasons, one being tuning stability. They just stay in tune that much better. Another reason is that, typically, once a graphite-reinforced neck is adjusted to its intended setup, it just stays there and rarely needs adjustment."

The bridge is an ingenious hybrid tremolo by MannMade USA that marries an S-style spring cavity and bridge plate with three two-string T-style brass saddles, compensated for precise intonation. (Baker calls it "simply a work of art in its own right.") Even when the guitar is played unplugged, the result is a ring and solidity of tone akin to the Tele thing in general, with a touch of the warmth and roundness of brass, delivering piano-like low-string notes and silky highs.

Extra effort is also in evidence in the Telstar's electronics. Lollar Blackface Strat pickups in the neck and middle, and a Special T in the bridge, are wired through the 10-position switch, which delivers the five traditional S-S-S selections in its lower position and five alternatives — including several in-series options and neck-bridge together — across its upper travel.

We tested the Telstar through a Friedman Mini Dirty Shirley with an 1x12 cab and a 4x10 Fender Super Reverb combo. The design's most immediately apparent boon is that it answers the longing of so many Strat players for a more Tele-like bridge pickup, and of Tele players for a Strat-like neck pickup, in-between positions and whammy unit. Otherwise, it's simply an extremely good-sounding guitar by any measure. I enjoyed its tight, bold lows, its shimmering highs that bloom with harmonic overtones without ever being harsh or strident, and the outstanding clarity and articulation throughout, with enough midrange grunt from several pickup settings when you need it to slip into rock mode without breaking a sweat.

The bonus pickup combinations offer very usable tones — I'm particularly enamored of the neck-and-bridge selection — and it's difficult to think of what a player might miss here, other than a too-thin Strat bridge pickup or an anemic Tele neck pickup. The b3 Guitars Telstar successfully blends something like 75 percent each from the S and T models to create 150 percent worth of goodness. In the process, it somehow feels like an entirely different guitar, and an extremely well-built one at that, which I'd say makes it a successful venture.

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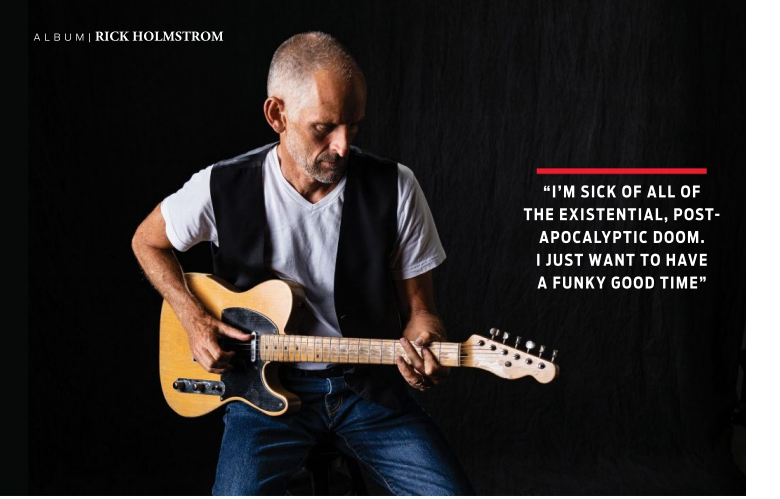


"I'M SICK OF ALL OF THE EXISTENTIAL, POST-APOCALYPTIC DOOM. I JUST WANT TO HAVE A FUNKY GOOD TIME"

FAST FUN

Rick Holmstrom reacts to the current crazy with *Get It*, a rapid release with a joyful noise.

BY MICHAEL ROSS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG VOROBIOV

ON HIS 2021 release, *See That Light*, L.A. blues legend and Mavis Staples guitarist Rick Holmstrom began to address the insanity of the current climate. "Everybody's staring at a screen, but we can't see what's in front of us," he writes in one lyric. But on January 6 of that year, while waiting for *See That Light* to come out, the world became exponentially crazier.

"The news was driving me batty, so I started getting together with the guys, just playing and recording," Holmstrom says. "We were looking ahead to when we could get back together, have barbecues and listen to music. We were not thinking about anything other than entertaining ourselves and then being thrilled when we heard the playback. With the other record not yet released, it was nuts to be doing this, but it felt so good."

Holmstrom, along with Staples' bandmates Steve Mugalian on drums and Gregory Boaz on bass, found themselves quickly churning out *Get It* (LuEllie Records), a record of short guitar instrumentals that hark back to the heyday of the Meters and Freddie King. For this rapid release, the guitarist favored a small amp.

"I used my Valco-made Bronson with one 10-inch field-coil speaker, two 6V6 power tubes and octal preamp tubes," the guitarist says. "It is the Valco equivalent of a tweed Fender Harvard. I used it with a reverb tank and an SIB Electronics Echodrive delay set for just a hint of slapback. It was recorded with a Shure SM57 up close and a condenser mic a few feet away from the amp. When you hear tremolo, it is a tweed Fender Tremolux. I like amps that have the bias tremolo. You can set the depth to a sweet spot, where you can hear it but it's not such a choppy, on/off sound. It's a little greasier and more organic."

Most of the tracks were recorded in Mugalian's garage on a Zoom multitrack recorder. "I mixed the record at Pacifica, a low-budget studio where I did many of my earlier blues albums," he recalls. "We did a lot of re-amping. We would put the whole drum kit through a guitar amp, and do the same thing to the guitar. We took the recorded Shure SM57 mic track from the Valco and ran it back through a Fender Tremolux or Vibrolux, just barely on, with two stereo condenser mics placed six or seven feet away from the amp. We would just put a taste of that track into the mix to add a bit more air, because the garage sounded kind of claustrophobic."

Air is a crucial part of Holmstrom's sound. Though initially not a fan of the trio format, he eventually became fond of the intimate thing that happens when three people perform together. "You throw a fourth person in and it changes everything," he says.

Many guitarists, recording or playing in a trio scenario, would attempt to fill the space

With Mavis Staples at La Cigale, Paris, July 5, 2019

with distortion, flurries of notes or overdubs. But while he's adept at a style that lets him often play rhythm and lead simultaneously, Holmstrom is also unafraid of space.

"My friend and mentor Junior Watson came to see one of my first trio gigs in Long Beach," he relates. "He said, 'Man, the way you used space was great. You just hit a chord and let it ring out.' I think it sounded good to do that because the room was so lively. I started doing it more often."

The guitar on most of the record is Holmstrom's 1953 Fender Telecaster that he has dubbed the Mariachi, but some of the dirtier tunes, like "Pour One Out" and "King Freddie," feature his 1955 Gibson Les Paul Special. It sports a push/pull pot on the bridge pickup tone knob that throws the two pickups out of phase for that vintage blues honk. "It's a TV model that has been refinished," he explains. "It's got all kinds of stuff wrong with it, which scared away the collectors. That's the only reason I could afford to buy it."

The track "G for Junior" references Watson, a master of the West Coast swing shuffle. Holmstrom demonstrates that the pupil has learned well, while making the style his own. Here, he exhibits a grittier Telecaster tone, turning the amp up and driving it with the tube preamp of the SIB.

Though it may appear that he is playing exclusively with his fingers, the guitarist actually has a pick clutched between his first and second digits at all times. "It started when I was playing with William Clark," he explains. "Guys like Smokey Wilson, Phillip Walker and others would come down after work, wearing their mechanics uniforms. Sometimes they would get up and play with us. I saw that none of them had picks. Maybe someone like Jimmy Rogers would have a thumb pick and some other pick on his finger, but most of what I was hearing from these old guys was the flesh of their fingers. I started trying to do that more, but I wouldn't put the pick down. It somehow just migrated into my fingers; I didn't even think about it. I sometimes use it when I'm playing rhythm or when I need to be cleaner, louder or faster."

Another Holmstrom trademark is how his body motion seems so integrated into his playing. According to him, it's connected to his listening process, and his first concern: rhythm. "That's something I've been doing ever since I started playing," he says. "It's like I'm off somewhere else listening to the groove of the whole group, and I'm definitely very rhythm conscious. I've been working with a metronome for many years, because a drummer I was playing with when I was younger told me, 'You need to get a metronome, set it on two and four and make the music swing like crazy, or you're wasting your time.' I'm trying to do that."

For Holmstrom, one advantage of lockdown was the opportunity to dive deep into the details and nuances of his guitar playing. A record he has been studying is Little Milton's Chess album *Sings Big Blues*, which features chestnuts like "Sweet Sixteen" and the Milton classic "Feel so Bad." "Junior Watson told me in the late '80s to get that record and practice along with it," Holmstrom says. "I put it on a year or two ago, when all this started. I'd forgotten how much stuff I'd picked up from Milton. But there are some things I had learned wrong. Like, sometimes it's not the flat seven but the sixth, bent up."

He also began to examine the pick-up notes leading to the downbeat. "I started to hear that on the Little Milton record," he explains. "Then I went back to Freddie King and all these other people I was into in my early 20s and realized it's the feel of the pick-up notes that makes it."

For years, Holmstrom has been known as a blues master, and rightly so, but he is much more. Even at his "bluesiest," he separates himself from many of the genre's current generation by eschewing any hint of a Stevie Ray Vaughan influence, or cranking up the distortion to blues-rock levels. Instead he exhibits excellence in lesser-exposed styles, like West Coast swing, Slim Harpo funk and Lightnin' Hopkins' down-and-dirty one-man band approach. On the other end of the spectrum, he has pushed the tradition's envelope by adding hip-hop production techniques to his 2007 release, *Hydraulic Groove*. All of the above has been absorbed into a personal approach and sound that is instantly recognizable. In more recent times, Holmstrom has added a deep knowledge and feel for gospel to his arsenal, with more songs reflecting the gentle, almost country lope of some of the early church styles.

"For many years, Mavis and her sister Yvonne would sit behind us while our band did a little instrumental section," Holmstrom says. "I used to play the gospel tune 'Oh, Mary Don't, You Weep.' I was knocked out by the Swan Silvertones' version. Sometimes, I might not know what I felt like doing and would look over at Mavis for inspiration. She'd go, 'You know what I want.' 'Oh Mary' is a gospel feel with brushes or light sticks and a lot of air."

The final song on *Get It*, "Walking With Diane," reflects this aspect of the guitarist's playing. "That song is about my mom, and I was trying to write something that would convey the feeling of thinking about her," he says. "I don't know what you call the style. I just try to think of melodies and ways to play simple groove stuff without words. Most of this record is about fun. I'm sick of all of the existential, post-apocalyptic doom. I just want to have a funky good time. That's all this record is." ■

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

See That Light

"King Freddie," "G Like Junior," "Surfer Chuck," "Kronky Tonk," "Walking With Diane"

DAVID WOLFF-PATRICK/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

PERFECT TEN

With his new album, *Ten*, Strat-slinger Albert Cummings is keeping the blues alive and well — and down to earth.

BY ROD BRAKES

ALBERT CUMMINGS IS an electric blues powerhouse. Having shared stages with guitar masters of the sheer caliber of B.B. King, Buddy Guy and Johnny Winter, among many others, he is known today as one of the greatest players on the contemporary blues guitar circuit.

Cummings arrived at the blues party later in life than you might expect, given his natural ability to stun audiences with a seemingly effortless display of jaw-dropping technique. In fact, he was 27 years old when he first played with a band. At an age when some of the world's greatest musicians checked out, Cummings was just checking in.

"It was a couple of years after that when Double Trouble had me come down to Austin," he tells *Guitar Player*. "Then I met B.B. King and Buddy Guy and Johnny Winter. It happened quickly. I was doing all that and still building houses."

Yep. You heard him right: He was still building houses. And with one foot onstage and the other in the construction business, he's still building houses today. "There's a song on the new album, *Ten*, called 'Two Hands,'" the guitarist explains. "It's one of my favorites, and it tells the tale of a working man. I think a lot of people are going to relate to that song."

Relatable, open and honest, Cummings is a guitar player with whom anyone can connect. Now, with more than two decades' worth of solo releases under his belt, his recorded body of work catalogs a guitarist who has gone from strength to strength.

We caught up with the man himself to talk about the art of blues guitar following the release of *Ten* (Ivy Music Corporation), a ripper of an album recorded in Peter Frampton's Phenix Studios in Nashville with legendary engineer/producer Chuck Ainlay.

You're currently endorsed by Fender, but what was your first guitar?

I just inherited an old acoustic that was hanging around that my father had. I remember it was an Aria jumbo. I wish I could find one again. It was fancy looking. I remember it had stars on the pickguard. But the action was just terrible! I mean you could park a truck under the strings. [*laughs*]

But really, whatever you have to learn on is good. Seriously, if you're learning to play guitar, that's great. You know, at the end of the day, it's a piece of wood with some metal tied onto it.

You're known for performing wild, improvisational stage shows. How did you develop that sort of approach to playing?
My father played guitar a little bit, but he had given up performing in a band just about the time I was born. I never really got to see him play regular shows, although he would get together with his old band whenever one of the sons or daughters of the band members got married. They'd always be the house band and play the wedding. So I'd get to see them do it then.

"IF YOU'RE NOT WILLING TO EXPOSE YOUR BELLY AND LET PEOPLE KNOW HOW YOU FEEL THROUGH THAT INSTRUMENT, THEN YOU'RE NOT REALLY REVEALING YOURSELF"

My father was really good at improvising, but only around certain solos. He'd play the melodies perfectly and then he'd stretch out a little bit. That was what got me thinking about improvising and playing something that's not exactly the same, so you're not just repeating yourself all the time.

How do you grab an audience's attention?
I've been to shows where I've seen the guitarist come out and just widdle away, but where are the feelings? That's what you see on social media all the time. Tommy Shannon [*of Double Trouble*] is a good friend of mine — you know, Stevie Ray Vaughan's bass player — and we talk about this a lot. He's been in music stores where he's heard bass players that are scary good, but if you put them in a band setting, they just can't groove. They can't make the audience stop talking. When everybody's talking, it's often because there's nothing going on onstage.

What are you looking to achieve when you pick up a guitar and perform?
I'm looking to make somebody's life better. Especially in the world today, people need something. I've cried playing. I've laughed playing. My guitar is my communicator when I'm not singing. It's my way of communicating with people. It all sounds kind of crazy, but I love connecting with people.

What advice would you give to people learning how to play blues?
You know, when kids come to the show, I'll give them a pick and I'll tell the parents, "Make sure he or she is understanding there are so many greats." But like B.B. King told me, "Just borrow something from the ones you like." It's like if you go to a farmers market and you've got your little basket that you're going to put your vegetables in: Pick the ones you like and bring it home. It's just endless.

Who are some of your favorite guitarists working today?
Tommy Emmanuel is one of the greatest I've ever seen. I've never seen him play live, but I've watched his videos. He's completely amazing. I love it when I can't even understand what a guitarist is doing because they're so advanced.

Redd Volkaert is another guy like that. He played guitar for Merle Haggard, and I think he's probably partly responsible for helping Brad Paisley learn a few things. Redd is one of those guys who you watch and go, "I don't even know what he's doing — is it even in the same tuning?" Because he's just so advanced. I love players like that because everything they're playing has something unique to them. That's what I like.

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Ten
"Need Somebody," "Too Old to Grow Up," "Last Call," "Two Hands," "Remember"

What about Stevie Ray?
It was his "take no prisoners" approach that I loved so much. You know, it's a freight train and you're not going to stop it. Stevie Ray was the first guy that really made me stop in my tracks to listen. When I first heard Stevie Ray, I was like, "There's no way that's real. Nobody plays like that!" I thought it was two guitars: one hitting rhythm and one playing lead.

Early on, when I was in college, I went to see Stevie by myself, and I just remember thinking how incredible it was. I just didn't know anybody could play like that. That experience was so inspiring, it set me on a mission to move more toward that way of playing. It was just so powerful. And relentless. He let you see his spirit — who he was. That was Stevie Ray.

What does the blues mean to you?
To me, blues is an expression of feelings. And if you're not willing to expose your belly and let people know how you feel through that instrument, then you're not really revealing yourself. You're not being yourself. No matter how good you get or what you've learned, you're hiding something.

It's a state of mind.
Exactly. And it's very hard to teach that. I mean there's no music school in the world that can teach that. You can say, "Here's a chord pattern, here are the notes, charts, learn this, read this," et cetera. And that's great, if you want to be a performer. But if you want to be a creator, you've got to go on a whole different journey. As a true creator, you don't have a trail to follow and there's nobody in front of you, because there's nobody like you. You're on your own path.

Vicki Peterson onstage with the Bangles at the Enmore Theatre, Sydney, Australia, October 12, 2008

MY CAREER IN FIVE SONGS

Bangles co-founder Vicki Peterson picks five memorable cuts from more than four decades of playing, singing and songwriting.

BY VINNIE DeMASI

ALTHOUGH THE BANGLES are most heralded for a string of top-10 singles and high-spirited MTV music videos from their '80s heyday, a deep dive into the Los Angeles quartet's catalog reveals them to be one of the most diverse, clever and flat-out rocking bands of their generation. Founded by Vicki Peterson, her skins-pounding sibling Debbi, and guitarist/vocalist Susanna Hoffs in 1981, the Bangles blended Beatles-inspired harmonies and clever arrangements with gutsy guitars and garage-rock sensibilities. Bassist (and co-founding member of the Runaways) Michael Steele would join in time for smash hits such as "Walk Like an Egyptian," "In Your Room," the Prince-penned "Manic Monday" and a rocked-up remake of Simon and Garfunkel's "Hazy Shade of Winter." By 1988's *Everything* album, the group began drifting toward a more polished, produced sound. Even though the ballad "Eternal Flame" would prove to be their biggest hit — as well as the biggest-selling single by an all-female band in history at the time — it would also underscore the creative tension that led to the Bangles' breakup by that decade's end.

Peterson then began the Psycho Sisters, a long-time creative partnership with vocalist Susan Cowsill of '60s pop group the Cowsills. In 1994, Peterson toured with the Go-Go's, replacing Charlotte Caffey, who was on maternity leave. She and Cowsill would also play regularly with indie-rock collective the Continental Drifters, becoming full-fledged members in time for 1999's *Vermillion* album.

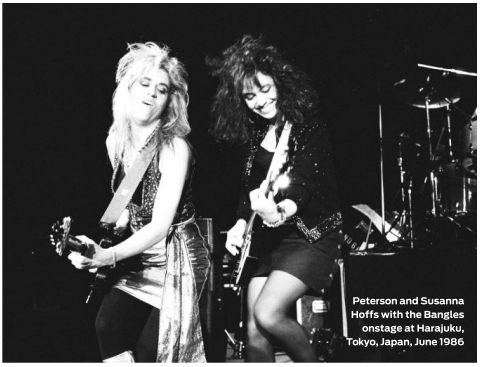
Peterson then rejoined her sister, Hoffs and Steele in the reunited Bangles in the late '90s, and together they recorded several new albums that put the emphasis back on the band's guitar-pop roots. The Bangles and Continental Drifters continue to maintain semiregular performance schedules, and original Bangles bassist Annette Zilinksas replaced Steele as of 2018. Since 2017, Peterson has also played in the band Action Skulls with her husband, John Cowsill (the Cowsills' original drummer/vocalist, Susan's older brother and a touring member of the Beach Boys) and Bill Mumy, the former *Lost in Space* child actor whose music credits include collaborations with America, Shaun Cassidy and Rick Springfield. We asked her to share the tales behind five cuts from her career.

LISA MARIE WILLIAMS/GETTY IMAGES

“HERO TAKES A FALL”
THE BANGLES — *ALL OVER THE PLACE* (1984)

“This was one of the first songs Susanna Hoffs and I wrote together back in ’81 or ’82. I was taking an English class at UCLA and we both had copies of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. The theme of the song is focused on how, in fiction, the hero would often have a fatal flaw that becomes their downfall. Musically, it’s one of my favorite songs to play live because we elongate the middle section, and I’ll kick on an Ibanez Tube Screamer and improvise a fuzzed-out ‘noise’ solo. I also really like the harmony vocals in this song. We add some unusual notes, like major 7ths and major 9ths. Sometimes people would ask me whether I sang the high part, the middle part or the low part in the Bangles, and the answer is that we all sang all of them. Debbie, Michael and I especially would often switch things around.”

“THIS SONG MARKED MY INDUCTION INTO THAT CLUB OF THOSE WHO HAVE SUFFERED A REALLY TRAGIC LOSS”



Peterson and Susanna Hoffs with the Bangles onstage at Harajuku, Tokyo, Japan, June 1986

“HE’S GOT A SECRET”
THE BANGLES — *ALL OVER THE PLACE* (1984)

“I wrote this when I was 19, and it was originally called ‘Johnny’s Got a Secret.’ I tend to write riffs around chord shapes, and that’s what’s going on in the intro riff. On the recorded version, it’s broken up between two guitars — one playing the double-stops on the high strings, and the other answering with the power chords. The album was produced by David Kahne, and he was really inventive at using separation between the instruments to build sonic landscapes. During the verses, the individual chords are recorded on separate tracks, so that they ring out over each other, creating a dissonant, atmospheric layering. Recording this way was a really eye-opening experience for me as a guitarist, because Susanna and I had come out of the ’60s pop and folk world of just strumming the chords. For the solo, I’m mostly fretting on the B string while droning the open high E, and I’m pretty sure it’s double-tracked and panned in stereo. Playing linear melodic lines against open drone strings is something I’ve always gravitated toward when soloing.”

“WATCHING THE SKY”
THE BANGLES — *EVERYTHING* (1988)

“Around the time I wrote this, I was going through a Led Zeppelin rediscovery phase. I had heard some of their hits growing up but began delving more into their album catalog and thought it’d be fun to do a track with a heavy John Bonham–esque drum sound. I’m also using a drop-D tuning [*low to high, D A D G B E*], and the droning riff is built around that, kind of giving it an instant vibe.

“When we were making *Everything*, we brought in a lot of different instruments. For part of the song, I used a guitar with a Hipshot B-bender on it that someone had lying around the studio. I remember tracking the part, and everyone in the control room whooping enthusiastically whenever I would wiggle my hip to make the bend! [*laughs*]

“We also overdubbed a Mellotron on the track. We were so excited to get our hands on one, because they were used on some of our favorite psychedelic stuff from the ’60s by the Beatles and David Bowie. They’re never quite in tune, but they sound like an old, slightly

STEVE EICHNER/GETTY IMAGES (1995); JOHN RASBEE/SHINKO MUSIC/GETTY IMAGES (1996)

Performing with the Continental Drifters in 1995

(from left) Peterson, Hoffs and bassist Michael Steele in Los Angeles, circa 1985

warped record. 'Watching the Sky' was originally written while we were on the road during a time of extensive touring, and it's really about missing a loved one but finding comfort in knowing they're looking up at the same moon that you are."

"WHO WE ARE, WHERE WE LIVE"

THE CONTINENTAL DRIFTERS—*VERMILLION* (1999)

"I wrote this song after my fiancé [*Bobby Donati*] passed away in 1991. The song pretty much came to me fully formed in about 20 minutes, and it's built around those rolling arpeggios on the second-position B, A and E chords, with the unison fretted B and open B notes ringing throughout as a sort of hypnotic drone. Whenever we play this live, I'll go into a meditative state. The song will always hold a special place for me, because I feel like it marked my induction into that club of those who have suffered a really tragic loss.

"The first time I played the song with the Continental Drifters was actually before I joined the band, when Susan Cowsill and I were guesting with them. Later, we recorded a demo version, and then the version on *Vermillion*. Robert Mache plays the blistering solo that you hear on the album, and usually when we play it live I'll take the last solo on it to close out the night."

"IT'S ABOUT MISSING A LOVED ONE BUT FINDING COMFORT IN KNOWING THEY'RE LOOKING UP AT THE SAME MOON THAT YOU ARE"

"NUMB"

THE PSYCHO SISTERS—*UP ON THE CHAIR, BEATRICE* (2014)

"Susan Cowsill and I have been singing, writing and performing as the Psycho Sisters for over three decades now, but we didn't get around to making a record together until 2012 or so. It's funny, because the first album I bought as a kid was the Cowsills' *We Can Fly*, and now they're my in-laws and bandmates! Singing with her is one of the most natural things I've ever done, and even if we haven't played together in a while, we can fall back into our groove instantaneously. On this particular track, I'm singing the melody and she's singing a lower harmony, but she jumps up to the higher parts during the chorus. She's very limber vocally, and we'll often jump around to find different ways of complementing each other. 'Numb' was another song with real emotional resonance for me; I remember writing it just after a bad breakup. Listening to it again recently, it sounds very '90s, because of the heavily distorted guitar and dark rolling chord progression." ▮

Onstage in 1984

DOUG BENC/GETTY IMAGES (1984); LESTER COHEN/GETTY IMAGES (1985)

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Hughes & Kettner

Hidden Charms

This 1957 Gibson ES-225TD is a lovely example of an overlooked model in the thinline's evolution.

MUCH HAS BEEN written about Gibson's most famous thinline semi-acoustic model, the ES-335. Virtually an overnight success upon its release in 1958, it has remained a classic and abiding design ever since, virtually defining the popular marriage between the solid- and hollowbody electric formats. Far less discussed, however, is the incremental way Gibson worked up to that shallow-bodied electric built with laminated woods and a solid center block — and the ES-225 of 1955–'59 was a major stepping-stone along the way.

Once the solidbody electric proved more than just a flash in the pan in the early '50s, Gibson and other makers began scrambling to achieve similar amplified properties in electric guitar models that still retained traditional elements and at least some semblance of archtop-hollowbody tradition. The ES-175, released three years prior to the Les Paul, had acknowledged the primacy of amplification over acoustics for guitars used in professional jazz, dance band and western swing settings, employing laminated maple in its top, back and sides to help reduce feedback. This approach would remain one piece of the puzzle, but there were plenty of other innovations waiting in the pipeline.

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

- Single-cutaway thinline body
- Laminated maple body with maple block beneath bridge
- Solid mahogany neck, 24.75" scale length
- Bound Brazilian rosewood fingerboard with dot inlays
- Les Paul-designed integral trapeze/wraparound-bridge
- Two single-coil P-90 pickups

The ES-225T was released with a single pickup in 1955 as the lower-priced sibling of a trio of debutante thinline guitars from Gibson, which included the more expensive Byrdland and ES-350T. The following year, it gained a second pickup as the ES-225TD, in Sunburst, and ES-TDN, in Natural finish. Although the Byrdland, ES-350T and ES-225 can be viewed as a trio of sorts, each was quite different in its specifications. The Byrdland and ES-350T were made to a shorter, 23 ½–inch scale length, and the former had a top carved from solid spruce, while the latter's was laminated maple. Both were fully hollow, with body depths of 2 ¼ inches at the rims.

The ES-225, on the other hand, retained the full traditional Gibson scale length of 24 ¾ inches, yet had a body that was even slimmer at approximately 1 $^{11}/_{16}$ inches at the rims, making it closer to what we would see in thinline electrics to come. Its body was also made entirely from laminated maple, but it concealed a nod to a Gibson semi-acoustic breakthrough that was still three years in the future: a solid block of maple in the center of the body, under the bridge. A feature that many players and collectors apparently remain unaware of today — given the ES-225 is often assumed to be fully hollow, like the lesser ES-125 or the ES-330 — this maple block doesn't run the full length of the body as it would in the ES-335 family, but still helps to reduce feedback, while yielding a more aggressive attack and sharper articulation.

Another distinctive feature found on this model, up until 1958 at least, is the Les

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DAVE HUNTER

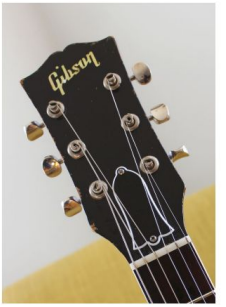
BY DAVE HUNTER

Paul–designed, all-in-one trapeze tailpiece with wraparound bridge bar. This piece of hardware is best known for its infamous use in wrap-under style on the first run of Les Pauls in 1952 and early '53. Gibson created the first several batches of its first solidbody with a neck angle too shallow to accommodate the wrap-over bar bridge as it was intended. The company was forced to wrap the strings under the unit instead, resulting in an awkward playing feel that also sullied the hardware's reputation in general. Released the same year as the first Les Paul, the ES-295 — essentially an ES-175 with a gold paint job and different hardware — carried this trapeze-bridge unit with the strings correctly wrapped over the top of the bar, and it sounds great as a result. The ES-225 also uses the thing the way it was intended, with impressively solid, clear, rich and sustaining results.

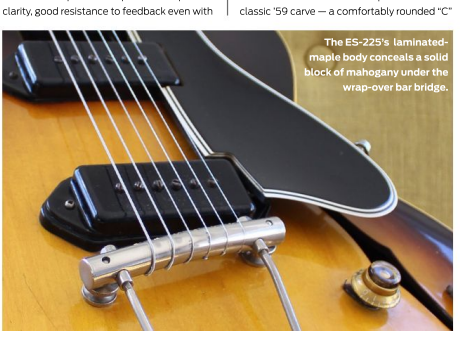
In addition to these particular design and construction points, the ES-225TD is essentially appointed like a semi-hollow Gibson Les Paul Special of the era, with a pair of fat P-90 single-coil pickups and the traditional four-knob control section, with a three-way selector switch on the upper bout. As a result, what first appears to be a thinline jazz box is actually revealed as a surprisingly fierce rock-and-roll machine when injected into the right amp. The lovely 1957 example featured here presents impressive snap and clarity, good resistance to feedback even with a cranked amp or an overdrive pedal applied (though you can get it there if you want to), and that characteristically beefy P-90 midrange grind, with a little more girth and sizzle from the semihollow laminated-maple construction.

WHAT APPEARS TO BE A THINLINE JAZZ BOX IS REVEALED AS A SURPRISINGLY FIERCE ROCK AND ROLL MACHINE WHEN INJECTED INTO THE RIGHT AMP

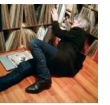
Although Gibson's necks from the early to mid '50s have retained a reputation for thick "baseball-bat" profiles, the shape of the one on this '57 is more like we'd expect from the classic '59 carve — a comfortably rounded "C" that sits beautifully in the hand and feels ergonomic and sweetly playable all the way up. The guitar has been refretted to keep it functional, and the original single-line Kluson Deluxe tuners have been replaced with reissues (as so often happens) that have nickel buttons instead of the original white plastic. Otherwise, it's in clean and entirely original condition.



Gibson shipped 582 ES-225TDs in 1957 and slightly more in each of the two following years, along with only 125 ES-225TDNs in '57, 223 in '58 and 171 in '59. Far more of the single-pickup ES-225T were manufactured throughout its run. The model was discontinued after 1959, likely because it fell through the cracks between the less expensive ES-125 and the more deluxe ES-330 and ES-335. In the last two years of its existence, the ES-225 was fitted with a traditional nickel trapeze tailpiece and floating bridge with compensated rosewood saddle piece, which changes the nature of the design in several ways. As equipped in '57, though, the ES-225TD and TDN are among the most playable non-jazz-exclusive Gibson electrics from the '50s to be had today for anything short of five figures, and they're great vintage-guitar bargains in general as a result…although there just aren't that many of them out there.



The ES-225's laminated-maple body conceals a solid block of mahogany under the wrap-over bar bridge.



BY JIM CAMPILONGO

When An Album Finds You

Discovering *22 Original Gospel Greats* was an encounter with divine intervention.

RELEASED IN 1977 on TVP Records, the album *22 Original Gospel Greats* entered my life during a visit to my Aunt Fran in Portland, Oregon. On an open-ended afternoon, I wandered into a local music store where I had no preconceived intentions of buying a gospel LP. But when I saw *22 Original Gospel Greats*, I thought, Why the hell not? Little did I know that listening to it would be like signing up for a community college night class about gospel music. I've sought out and loved gospel music ever since. All 22 tracks on the album are wonderfully curated; there's not a clinker in the bunch. Three cheers for TVP Records!

James Cleveland opens the LP with a big bang on "Get Right Church." His impressively masculine vocals (imagine rapper Chuck D singing gospel) are answered by a chorus of heavenly female sirens, while a repetitious two-beat drives it home. Fantastic stuff. An arpeggiated 6th chord starts off the Harmonizing Four on "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," and the entrance of Joseph Williams' baritone is mammoth, as it almost vibrates the room. "Motherless Child," the other Harmonizing Four track included here, is my favorite cut on this excellent compilation, bar none. The vocal arrangement sounds like a soulful string quartet. This track makes me proud to be human. Both songs left me wanting more and set me on a search for more Harmonizing Four. Do yourself a favor and check them out!

Shirley Caesar, who is represented three times on this LP, rocks the house in a big way on "The Bride of Jesus," "The Church is in Mourning" and "Tear the Kingdom Down," while oozing power and authority. Another favorite track is the Highway Q. C.'s "I Dreamed Heaven Was Like This." These gentlemen could show up anywhere and perform this track verbatim, just as it plays from these grooves. "I Had a Dream" by the Staple Singers features a great vibey vocal performance that's a must-hear. And by the way, guitar friends, if *vibrato guitar* were a term in the dictionary, it would have to include a photo of Mr. Roebuck "Pops" Staples, who tuned his guitar a half-step below 440. He exhibits a perfect vibrato effect, played in a complementary style. His low E sounds deeper than a mere half-step below standard pitch, and the end result feels well below sea level.

Sister Rosetta Tharpe appears here with two songs: "What Are They Doing in Heaven" and "God Lead Us Along." Both are stunning, with a vocal style that demands attention, but unfortunately these two Rosetta Tharpe tracks, as good as they are, don't feature any of her ferocious lead guitar playing. Sister Rosetta Tharpe playing her white Les Paul Custom (while most likely wearing a white mink coat) is humbling. That fine lady can stay in the ring with any super-heavyweight with her guitar lines that sound like distorted lasers emanating from her heart.

Gospel music's presence exists, whether it's delivered by Leadbelly, Sam Cooke, the Beatles, James Brown, Robert Johnson, Marvin Gaye, the MC5 or Tim Dog. It's my opinion that all American music has its roots in gospel music.

For that matter, *22 Original Gospel Greats* merits a family tree for all the future purchases I made based on the tracks here that called my name. At the very least, this affordable LP (also available at minuscule prices on CD) would be a great addition to every music collection. The beauty and minor miracle of randomly going through record store LP bins is that sometimes a record will find you. And you will be the better for it.

THIS RECORD MERITS A FAMILY TREE FOR ALL THE FUTURE PURCHASES I MADE BASED ON THE TRACKS HERE THAT CALLED MY NAME

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UP THE FUNKTION

L.A.'s Eric Krasno has fretboard fire and a prolific pen, making him one of the most exciting R&B-vibed guitarists working today.

BY ROBIN DAVEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LELAND HAYWARD

A ROSTER OF THE artists signed to the Mascot Label Group reads like a list of the sharpest guitar players around. From Steve Vai to Robben Ford, the level of musicianship is incredible. But one artist on the roster seemed a little more intriguing. Los Angeles resident Eric Krasno is one of those interesting musicians who is happy to sit on a tasteful, minimal groove all through one song, only to burn like a latter-day Wes Montgomery on the next. Blending elements of Herbie Hancock and Curtis Mayfield in his writing, with chops worthy of Grant Green, Krasno is a subtle gem of a musician.

The guitarist's broad-based approach may come from his background as a producer — and he has produced some of the biggest names in music, from rapper 50 Cent to Derek Trucks & Susan Tedeschi to soul legend Aaron Neville. And it also may be why his own records are studies in warm, understated funk, with great-sounding arrangements. A veteran of the funk/jazz bands Lettuce and Soulive, he's now an established solo artist whose in-the-pocket new album, *Always*, walks in the footsteps of the Meters and Shuggie Otis. Intrigued, we swung by his home in Pasadena to find out more about this soulful, multifaceted player.

What inspired you to pick up a guitar in the first place?

My brother played guitar. He's almost six years older than me. And my grandfather was a musician, and my dad played a lot of music too, though not professionally. Basically, it was in my house. When my brother started jamming with his friends in our basement, it was just something I wanted to be a part of. I had a record player that you could actually plug an instrument into. My brother let me borrow his guitar, and I would play along with records and try to get good enough to the point where I could go jam with him and his friends.

Some of those early Led Zeppelin records just blew my mind. My dad loved the Rolling Stones and the Beatles, and Van Halen was popular at the time, but Led Zeppelin just felt like it was mine. I loved my dad's music that he played, and I loved my brother's, but when I found Led Zeppelin, it was like me. Then guys like Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan blew my mind. And that was when I kind of took the dive.

Your influences have a very bluesy foundation. With the music you're playing now, your guitar style is a little more funky. What led you that way?

There were points where I took exits off the highway into different realms. It might have been around the same time I discovered James Brown, and the stuff he was doing blew my mind, too, that rhythm stuff. And the Meters, Leo Nocentelli and the rhythm players that were doing such unique, interesting stuff with the guitar that was much more percussive. I was really into the Headhunters era of Herbie Hancock — [*featuring Motown Records Funk Brothers guitarist*] Wah Wah Watson — and all those records. Compositionally, I liked how he made funk music, with jazz chord changes in there, and a lot of improvising and psychedelic elements.

When we started the band Lettuce [*in 1992*], the biggest influence really was

that Herbie Hancock '70s era and Tower of Power. We were really into hip-hop. I was into Run-DMC back in the day, and the Beastie Boys, so that's when all of that started feeding into it. My dad played both Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder when I was a kid, and I really got into the '70s era of Stevie's music — *Music of My Mind* and *Fulfillingness' First Finale*… All those records. All of it seeped in as I got older and discovered more and more records.

Unlike many guitarists, you've done a lot of high-level production work in your career. How did you get into that world?
When I was in college, I started to produce. I didn't even know that I was doing it, but I've always been interested in producing records, since back in the day, sitting with my dad's record collection and looking through the liner notes and wondering what each role was. I learned engineering just by plugging things in and figuring things out from the early days with my four-track.

When Soulive got signed and we got to work with all these amazing engineers and producers, I was always studying what they were doing. Then, on the side, I was producing for other singers, and some of those things got pretty successful. Before I even really knew what I was doing, I was getting jobs producing, and it's always been a sideline to my career as an artist. It's often been hard to juggle the two, or to really focus on producing, because I've always had bands and tours going on. But it's something I'm very passionate about, nonetheless.

You've worked with a pretty diverse set of artists over the years.
Yeah, it's been all over the map. I produced Aaron Neville's record a few years ago. I produced 50 Cent and a lot of hip-hop records, especially during that era. Then there was Norah Jones. I've also worked with members of the Grateful Dead and with Dave Matthews.

How big a part does your guitar playing play when you're producing?
It's always different. If I'm doing a hip-hop session, it may not be there. I produced a group called the London Souls where I don't play guitar on the record but I play bass. With Derek Trucks and Susan Tedeschi, I'll play on some things. There's other times, like Andy Frasco — I just produced his record — and I'm playing guitar on everything, as well as bass, and it's more prominent. It's different every time. Being a producer, I do whatever's needed in that moment.

Your latest record, *Always*, has a really distinctive sound — taut and sparse, yet groovy. How did you arrive at that?
When the pandemic first hit, I met a producer/artist named Otis McDonald through a mutual friend, Will Blades, who is the keyboardist in my band. He was like, "Oh, you've got to work with this guy. He's amazing." We met via Instagram. He was like, "Hey, I'm doing this compilation project for charity. Wanted to see if you might want to do a song." At that time, I was just recording some demos of stuff here in my studio. I was messing around with this Bob Dylan song, "The Man in Me," and I played acoustic and sang it. I sent it to him and he was like, "Oh man, let me add some stuff to this." So he produced it via satellite, added drums, bass, keys, background vocals. It was so stylistically right where I'm at. I was like, "Hey, man,

"BEING ON THE ROAD AND SINGING EVERY NIGHT, THAT REALLY INFORMED HOW I WANTED TO WRITE SONGS FOR ME"

I have a bunch of other songs sitting around."

We did pretty much the whole record like that. We were both sitting in our studios, and it really sounds live, but the record, it's primarily me and him. He's a great drummer and keyboard player, and a great engineer and mixer.

When it came to the guitars, how did you approach the songs?
John Mayer sent me one of his PRS Silver Sky guitars, and I loved it. It kind of got me back into the single-coil Strat world and using the fuzz pedal on a lot of songs. That was the cool sound I used

1. The Analog Man King of Tone overdrive and MXR Super Badass Variac Fuzz are key pedals for Krasno.
2. More MXR classics, in micro form, adorn his grab-and-go pedalboard.

3. A well-used Gibson EB-2 semi-acoustic bass reminds the visitor that much of Krasno's career has been spent as a producer, slotting in hooks and bass lines to tracks where needed.

4. A Gretsch G5260T Electromatic baritone electric offers some extra low-down grunt for Krasno's warm and efficient grooves — a secret weapon many players have come to rely upon.

throughout the record. There's some acoustic guitar on there, but mostly I used either a Strat or the Silver Sky. I just started developing this new guitar with D'Angelico, so that's on the last couple of songs, which is also a single-coil vibe. I think I used my Ibanez model on the song called "Hold Tight," but primarily I was in the Strat world.

What were your go-to amps?
I was actually using a Supro Statesman head and a [*Universal Audio*] Ox. I used a Super Reverb with the Ox as well, so I went between those two. The Ox is an attenuator, but it also has a digital thing where it's a speaker emulator. I had been miking the amps previously, and then just out of convenience I was using the Ox. I loved the tones I was getting, even more than miking the amp.

Are there any go-to overdrive and distortion pedals that shape your sound on the record?
I use an [*Analog Man*] King of Tone all the time and an MXR Super Badass Variac Fuzz. I have a lot of fuzz pedals, but I just became obsessed with this one. They sent me that right around the same time Mayer sent me that red Silver Sky, and when I plugged those in together, it was like a magic combination. It has this Variac function that changes the voltage or emulates the voltage of the battery dying, which is cool because it has this sputtering tone. Pretty much every solo on my record has that pedal on it.

At what point did you feel like you wanted to have a solo project — something that had your name on it?
I made a solo record many years ago called *Reminisce* [*2010*], but it was a very different thing because it was in the realm of Soulive and Lettuce, melding those things together. Whereas when I made the record *Blood From a Stone* [*2016*], I consider that my first solo record because it's the first record I was singing on.

At that time, I was really into songwriting and lyric writing, and I had been working with a lot of other artists and writing for them. I also had a group of songs I wanted to record, and I called my friend Dave Gutter. At that point, a lot of the songs were instrumental, and he's one of my favorite lyric writers. So we got together and, within a few days, we wrote a bunch of great songs. I sang them, initially thinking maybe these are demos and I'll get a bunch of great singers that I know to sing them. But the demos just felt right. I'd always sung backgrounds. I'd always had singers in my band, but at that point I was like, Okay, maybe it is time to just sing.

In 2015 or 2016, I formed a band around that record. It was at that point that I started to figure it out, because being on the road and singing every night informed how I wanted to write songs for me. Just even physically: Where does my voice work? Where does it fit? I had to start figuring out the right keys and, beyond that, what I wanted to say and, stylistically, how I could blend all these different things together.

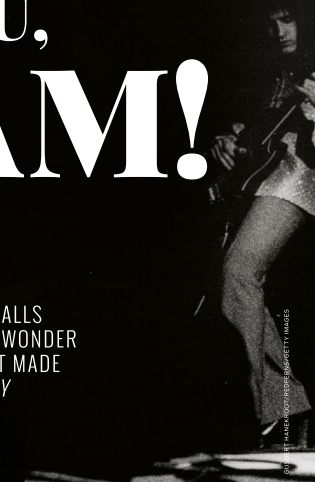
Because even just in our conversation today, you can hear that I'm into so many different things. Which is great when you're a producer, because you're bouncing between these different artists. But when you make a record, you can't go from trap music to psychedelic rock. If there's a way to drop all those influences in and create a unique sound, that is the magic, and that's something I've been trying to get to.

WHAM BAM THANK YOU, MA'AM!

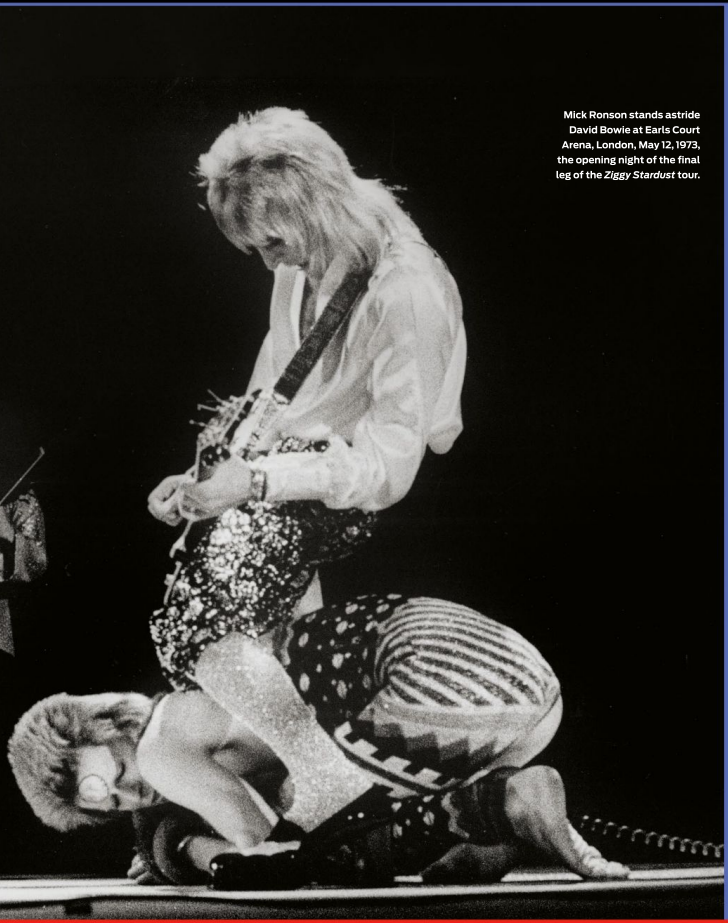
"WE HAD TWO WEEKS TO MAKE AN ALBUM!"

ENGINEER AND PRODUCER **KEN SCOTT** RECALLS DAVID BOWIE'S ASCENT FROM ONE-HIT BOY WONDER TO THE NAZZ OF GLAM AND THE ALBUM THAT MADE IT ALL HAPPEN: *THE RISE AND FALL OF ZIGGY STARDUST AND THE SPIDERS FROM MARS.*

BY JOE BOSSO



GUITAR HANDLOOP/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



Mick Ronson stands astride David Bowie at Earls Court Arena, London, May 12, 1973, the opening night of the final leg of the *Ziggy Stardust* tour.

Even a cursory glance at producer/engineer Ken Scott's resume is bound to fill someone with a sense of awe. Among the iconic artists he's worked with are the likes of the Beatles, Elton John, Jeff Beck, Lou Reed and Harry Nilsson. During the early '70s, Scott was the go-to man behind the console for the *crème de la crème* of British rock royalty. George Harrison tapped him to engineer his classic *All Things Must Pass*, and John Lennon followed suit for his *Imagine* album.

Astonishingly, if one were to have told Scott in 1972 that a half-century later he would be reminiscing about any of the albums he was recording, he would have laughed his head off. "I think I would have found the whole thing ludicrous," he says. "We never thought anything we were doing had any kind of longevity," he says. "It's not that we didn't think the music was any good; it's just that we were constantly moving on to the next thing."

"I SUDDENLY REALIZED THERE WAS A HELL OF A LOT MORE TO HIM. I REALIZED THAT HE COULD BE HUGE"

Among the records Scott had a hand in during those heady days of the early '70s are four epochal (and star-making) David Bowie albums that he engineered and co-produced with the singer-songwriter: 1971's *Hunky Dory*, 1972's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, and 1973's *Aladdin Sane* and *Pin Ups*. Viewed in the rearview mirror, the variety of musical styles that mercurial artist flirted with, absorbed and even pioneered on these records — there's folk, dancehall, pop, art rock, glam, garage rock and proto-punk — now feels nothing less than remarkable. But as Scott recalls, "The idea that we were doing something historic never entered our minds. Back then, recording contracts called for two albums a year. When we made a record, we thought, If this lasts for six months, then we've done our job correctly."

Scott got his start at the age of 16 as a lowly tape logger at London's EMI Studios and gradually rose through the ranks to second engineer and then full-fledged engineer, manning the board for the bulk of the Beatles' sprawling 1968 self-titled double album. He first worked with Bowie on the albums *Space Oddity* and *The Man Who Sold the World*. "Quite honestly, I didn't see David's talent at the time," he says. "I thought he was a really nice guy who obviously had a certain amount of talent. But from what I'd seen on those two albums I did with him as an engineer, I didn't think he had it in him to be huge."

Scott had yet to produce a record on his own, and he was itching for an opportunity to jump into the big leagues. Ironically, that invitation came from Bowie, who had asked him to engineer a session that the singer was producing for his clothing-designer friend, Freddie Burretti, whom Bowie hoped would become "the next Mick Jagger." "Being British, we were taking a tea break in the studio," Scott recalls, "and I mentioned to David that I wanted to start producing. That's when he said, 'Well, I've just signed a new management deal. They want to put me in the studio to record an album so they can shop a record deal. I was going to produce it myself, but I don't know if I'm capable. Will you co-produce it with me?'"

It was an enticing offer, but Scott was still unsure that Bowie had the goods in him. However, his mind changed a few weeks later when the singer played him demos for what would be his next album. "At that point, I suddenly realized there was a hell of a lot more to him that I'd heard from the previous two albums," Scott says. "And it was then that I realized that he could be huge."

From the outset, Scott adopted a "let David be David" ethos in the studio, which he says was a stark contrast to the production style of the singer's previous co-producer, Tony Visconti. "Tony was the bass player, the arranger and the producer, and I didn't get the feeling that David had much say," he offers. "It was David's songs and his vocals. He had a certain amount of input, but it didn't go that far. I learned a lot from watching people like [*producers*] George Martin and Gus Dudgeon. They both had the mindset of 'the talent is put in the studio to create, and you have to allow the talent the freedom to do that,' knowing that you can always pull them back if they go too far afield."

Hunky Dory was Scott's and Bowie's "getting to know each other" album, and as Scott notes, "We both went in with a lot of fear, because neither of us had really done what we were about to do. But as things started to happen, we gained confidence, and of course, David had some wonderful songs. As we worked together, we started to push the envelope a little further, and we saw that things were working, so we kept at it over the next few albums."

It also helped that Bowie brought with him an ace band, the Spiders from Mars, consisting of bassist Trevor Bolder, drummer Mick Woodmansey and guitarist Mick Ronson, the latter of whom would

INSET: The covers of *Hunky Dory* and *Ziggy Stardust*. RIGHT: Bowie with 12-string guitar at the Aylesbury Friars, January 29, 1972, wearing the jumpsuit seen on the *Ziggy Stardust* album cover.

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

soon become the singer's flashy onstage foil and main studio sound architect. "I already knew Ronno and Woody a little from their playing on *The Man Who Sold the World*, and I knew they would work perfectly," Scott says. "They were easy to work with, very professional and fun. Ronno was definitely the band leader when one was required, but generally the guys just knew what they had to do and what was needed."

"ON 'FIVE YEARS,' BY THE END OF THE TAKE, TEARS WERE ROLLING DOWN HIS FACE. HE WAS AMAZING"

***Ziggy Stardust* is viewed as one of rock's great concept albums, but you once said that it didn't start that way at all.**

I don't think there ever was a concept to it, but somehow that became applied to the record. People find small things to put a story together. One of the mainstays of the whole concept album thing is the track "Starman." Without that song, the whole concept falls apart. Originally, we had Chuck Berry's "Around and Around" in that place. It was only when RCA said they didn't hear a single that we went back in and recorded "Starman." Had that not happened, the concept idea would've been out the window. They wouldn't have had anything to pin it on.

Bowie and Ronson recording "The 1980 Floor Show" for *The Midnight Special* TV show, October 20, 1973. It was their last time onstage together in the 1970s.

Generally speaking, how did David present songs to you? Were they demoed? Were some cuts written in the studio?

Some songs were demoed, but nothing was really written in the studio. I remember on *Hunky Dory*, "The Bewlay Brothers" was the last track that we did. It came together in the studio, but it wasn't written there. David came in toward the end of the recording and said, "We've got to do one more track. I've got this song, but don't listen to the lyrics." I asked him why, and he said, "Because they don't mean anything. I just wrote it for the American market to see what they would read into it."

This was during the "Paul is dead" period. David picked up on how people in America were reading into things that weren't there, so he came up with lyrics specifically for that kind of thing, to see what would happen. Over the years, I've heard many different interpretations of what it's about, and I'm sure David agreed with all of them.

Was David generally efficient in the studio?

Are you kidding? [*laughs*] He petrified Woody, Trevor and Ronno. They were always on edge, because they always felt if they didn't get the track quickly, David would just say, "It's not happening. Let's move on to something else." Bear in mind that, vocally, he was absolutely astounding. Of the four albums I co-produced with him, 85 to 90 percent of the vocals were first takes from beginning to end. I would run the tape a little just to get him to sing so I could get the sound levels, and then once I hit "record" to get a real take, he would nail it. A lot of those performances are what you hear today. He didn't hold back. On the song "Five Years," by the end of the take, he was bawling his eyes out. Tears were rolling down his face. He was amazing.

How was David's relationship with Mick Ronson as guitar players? Did he give Mick guidance as to what he wanted, or did he let him come up with his own parts?

The feeling that I got — or I get in hindsight — was that David was very good at picking teams. He looked for people who could give him exactly what he was after without necessarily telling them what he wanted. He would show them the song, and then people sort of worked out their own parts. But it usually would be exactly what he wanted. There might have been times when something would've been said, but most of the time it was left up to everyone to sort of come up with their own parts. With me, David never came to the mixes. He would leave me to get on with it and do what I did best.

What were your feelings about Mick as a guitar player?

Oh, he was great. He was also quick — one or two takes. Then we'd listen and decide what should be doubled or harmonized. He knew what a song needed. Quite often I'd say, "Okay, Mick, it's time to —" and

JACK KAY/DAILY EXPRESS/GETTY IMAGES

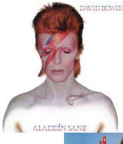
he would say, "I know, the solo. I'll do it right now." And he would do what was needed right away.

David played a lot of acoustic guitar in the studio, but did he ever play electric?
I don't remember David ever playing electric, but there were times when Mick would play acoustic.

What kinds of guitars would Mick bring to the studio? He liked his '68 Les Paul Custom.
It would always be his Paul, his Marshall stack and his Cry Baby wah. With the wah, he would park it to the one setting and leave it there, which made things very easy for us in terms of finding a sound. There was none of the messing around with the amp. Keeping the wah at one setting gave him more of a unique sound because it was more compact. He just sounded different from everybody else who would go in and turn up loud.

On *Ziggy Stardust*, there's a great marriage of electric riffs and solos with the sound of acoustics. Was that combination ever discussed?
It wasn't discussed, really; it was just understood: "This is the sound for this song." For me, the acoustic thing served two purposes. All of those old rock and roll songs by Eddie Cochran, Presley, Bill Haley — all those guys — they had acoustic guitar on them. To get that early rock and roll sound, we needed acoustics. There was that, but something I didn't realize was how they took the place of cymbals. During that period, I didn't like cymbals, so I would tend to keep the overheads down on the drums, but I also had a very bright sound on the acoustic, and that sound covered what cymbals would normally do. At the same time, we got a totally different feel than what cymbals would have achieved.

Performing "Starman" on *Top of the Pops*, July 5, 1972. BELOW: The covers of *Aladdin Sane* and *Pin Ups*



You have that mix of acoustics and electrics on "Suffragette City," which is now seen as a proto-punk song. The solo is one of Mick's best. Did he just pull that out of the air one day?
Probably. Like I said, he was very fast. We had two weeks to make an album, so we had to do everything quickly, including solos. We didn't micromanage anything.

Now Mick wasn't just the guitar player; he did the string arrangements too.
He did. He was great with that. He had his way of doing things. He'd work on arrangements the night before a session, and apparently he would fall asleep before completing his work. So he would run into the

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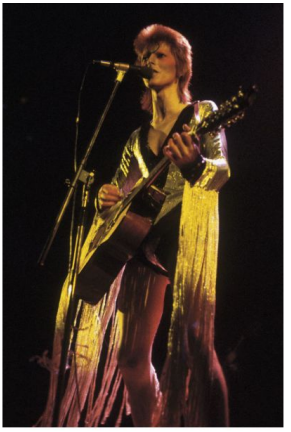


RIGHT: At the Hammersmith Odeon, July 3, 1973, the final night of the *Ziggy Stardust* tour. FAR RIGHT: Ronson on the tour's first North American date, at Cleveland's Music Hall, September 22, 1972

DEB OSS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (BOWIE); JOHN LYNN KIRK/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (RONSON)

studio, lock himself in the bathroom and complete it there. Twenty minutes would go by, and he'd come out with a stack of music paper. He'd go into the studio and hand it out to the musicians.

At the point when you recorded *Aladdin Sane*, David was a star.

[*laughs*] Yes, very much so.

"MICK WOULD PARK THE WAH TO THE ONE SETTING AND LEAVE IT THERE. HE JUST SOUNDED DIFFERENT FROM EVERYBODY ELSE WHO WOULD GO IN AND TURN UP LOUD"

Did you notice any changes in him that made working with him different?

Working with him? No. There was a change, I think, for both of us: We'd gained confidence. Obviously, when you're working on something and then it's suddenly successful, that gives you a lot of confidence to try other things. But we basically worked the same.

The weirdest thing for me was recording some of the stuff at RCA in New York, because the studio was heavily unionized, and I had to play the typical producer, sitting at the end of the desk. I wasn't allowed to touch anything. I remember once when I pushed a button on the desk while the engineer and assistant engineers were out eating: I was just trying to make sure the band could hear themselves on their headphones and rehearse the next track. When the engineer came back, he hit the roof. I could have taken the entire studio out. Everyone could have gone on strike because I pushed one button.

***Aladdin Sane* is a tougher-sounding album than *Ziggy Stardust*.**

It is tougher sounding, and I think that's a result of the band touring the States. It changed them in certain ways. They got a bit heavier and grew some balls. It was recorded very much the same way as the others; we just went in and did what we did. But yes, David's songs were heavier because of the American influence.

It's there in "The Jean Genie," which uses Bo Diddley's "I'm a Man" riff as it was interpreted by the Yardbirds, but in a bluesier style.

Absolutely. David was picking up on all that stuff.

Because the band was touring so much, was it harder for you as a producer to get everyone's attention? Their world was now moving a lot faster.

In some ways, but as I've said, we just went into the studio and did what we did. It's what we knew. We didn't think about the time frame. It's not like nowadays, when people take two years to make a bloody record. They micromanage every single eighth note or whatever.

Do you remember what brought about the cover of "Let's Spend the Night Together"?

Not really. David always liked to do covers. I guess he

wanted to do a Stones song because of his friendship with Jagger.

You recorded a few amazing songs that didn't make *Aladdin Sane*. There was "John, I'm Only Dancing."
That was a very strange one. There are so many different versions of that, some of which I was part of and some I wasn't. But they're all almost identical.

There was also "All the Young Dudes."
Oh yeah. I really enjoyed that one, but it just didn't work for the album. That happens. When I worked with Supertramp, we had the song "Breakfast in America" for their *Crimes of the Century* album, but it didn't fit the record. It came out much later [*as the title track*] on what became their biggest album.

Finally, there's *Pin Ups*. Is it fair to call that kind of a "stop-gap" album?
I think so. That was a strange one in many respects because David had just fired two members of the band: Trevor and Woody. In that respect, there was a lot of ill feeling. The bass player who was originally supposed to be playing on the album pulled out at the last minute, so David had to go back to Trevor and say, "Will you play bass?" After you've just fired the guy, that's a very hard thing to do. You can imagine how Trevor felt about it.

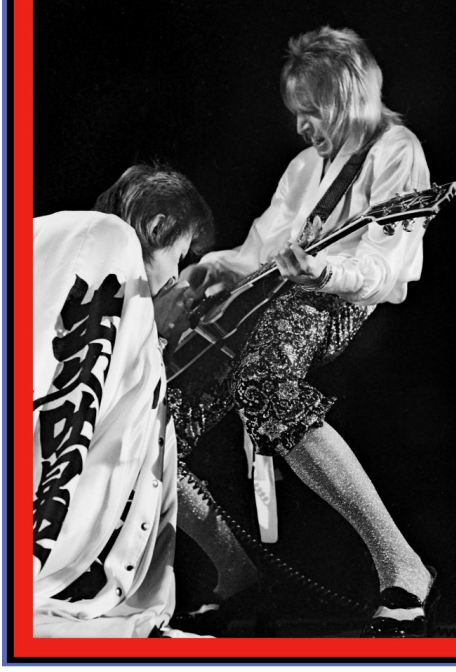
Ronno, I think, was in a difficult place because he knew that he wasn't going to be doing much more with David. Tony Defries, their manager, had said to Mick, "I'm going to make you a star just the way I did David." Which was bullshit. Defries just wanted all of them out of the way, because they had threatened a strike when they were going over to Japan.

With Mick being fired before the start of the record, was he harder to work with?
He was fine. He was good. It was a very strange album, because things were changing and had changed. My wife was going to give birth to twins while I was in France. I flew back the night before, but I still managed to get to the hospital late, after she'd already given birth. There were distractions for everyone.

Outside of the studio, did you and David socialize much?
We did, but not often. We were generally too busy.

As you were finishing *Pin Ups*, was there any indication where David was headed next?
Not at that point. It became more obvious a little later, because I continued working with him a little. There was something called "The 1980 Floor Show," which was for [*NBC's*] *The Midnight Special*. I did that. Just before we recorded it, there were two songs that David had put together that were on *Diamond Dogs*: "1984" and "Dodo." They were one song. That was one of the few times that David came to a mix, and he kept on putting on Barry White. It was sort of a Philadelphia soul–type sound. He kept on reverting to that, saying, "I want it to sound more like that." We could never get that, because the musicians were so totally different, but he was after the American feel.

He was getting into soul and funk, but certainly not the electronic music that he would help to pioneer later in the '70s.
Oh, no, no. That certainly came about much later. But it was that shift to what he would call "plastic soul," and that started to become obvious. That was the last time I worked with him. There was that track, and then we did "The 1980 Floor Show," and then we never worked together again.



At Earl's Court Arena, London, May 12, 1973

GUILBERT HANEBOOT-REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

STARMAN

IN 1970, **MICK RONSON** CHANGED THE CAREER OF DAVID BOWIE AND WENT ON TO WORK WITH LOU REED, BOB DYLAN, JOHN MELLENCAMP, MORRISSEY AND MORE. WE CHART THE RISE AND FALL OF GLAM-ROCK'S GREATEST GUITARIST.

BY MAX BELL

In 1970, Mick Ronson changed the musical fortunes of David Bowie, a struggling singer-songwriter with two novelty hits behind him. Together, and with their band the Spiders From Mars, they reinvented Bowie musically and created some of glam-rock's best-loved albums: *Hunky Dory*, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars*, *Aladdin Sane* and *Pin Ups*. Afterward, Ronson struggled to match that initial success, despite a catalog of collaborations that included some of rock's biggest names: Bob Dylan, Lou Reed, Ian Hunter, Roger McGuinn, Morrissey, John Mellencamp and many others.

Although Ronson's career was defined by his time with Bowie, there was a significant before and after. In the 1960s, he played in various groups from his hometown of Hull, including the Mariners, who were advised by the Rolling Stones' Bill Wyman to change their name to the King Bees around the time Bowie was fronting a group called Davie Jones and the King Bees. He was also a member of the Rats, whose main claim to fame was the 1967 single "The Rise and Fall of Bernie Gripplestone."

"Mick was the best guitarist in Hull, so when he left to head down south and join Bowie, I was pretty upset," recalls Benny Marshall, the Rats' lead singer and a close friend of Ronson's. "John Cambridge, our drummer, had played with Bowie on *Space Oddity* [*his second album, a.k.a.* David Bowie]. He was the bloke who went back to Hull in January 1970 with the brief to find Ronson and bring him to London. He found Mick marking out the lines on the municipal football pitch."

Cambridge did as instructed, and Bowie and Ronson were introduced at the Marquee club, where Bowie was

Mick Ronson performing with Mott the Hoople at the Uris Theatre in New York City, May 10, 1974

JOHN MOTHERSBAUGH/GETTY IMAGES

playing on February 3, 1970. Two days later, Ronson had learned the riffs and song arrangements well enough to back Bowie, Cambridge and bassist/producer Tony Visconti for a John Peel Radio 1 show live in concert at the Paris Theatre in London's Lower Regent Street. They played 15 songs, including a new number, "Width of a Circle," and plenty of material from Bowie's recently released self-titled second album. Reaction was positive, and Ronson moved into Bowie's Haddon Hall apartment on Southend Road in Beckenham, becoming part of the family. The timing of his arrival was perfect: Bowie wanted to make a hard-rock album. As Visconti said later, "We respected groups like Cream, but we didn't have that in us. We needed someone to be [*that*] important element, and that somebody was Mick Ronson."

In terms of his personality, Ronson was a good fit. Everyone loved Ronson's laconic Northern humor too, especially Bowie, whose father and mother came from Yorkshire and Lancashire, respectively. He'd tease Ronson and get just as good back. But it was, of course, his guitar playing that stunned them.

"WHAT IS REMARKABLE IS THAT HE WAS SO OVERLOOKED, AND HE STILL IS. HE WAS EXTREMELY HUMBLE. HE WAS JUST HAPPY TO BE THERE"
– MORRISSEY

"He floored us," Visconti said. "When David and I met him, we knew he'd fit in looks-wise, but we had no idea what was coming until he picked up his Les Paul and played for us. He really didn't have to be taught the few songs we'd already worked up with John Cambridge. Mick watched our hands on the guitar and bass necks, and he just knew what to play, but he didn't say much. We thought he was just a cool, silent type. Later we found out that our apartment in Beckenham was very 'big time' for him, and he was simply overwhelmed."

Visconti insists Ronson came to Trident Studio in September 1969, when the *David Bowie/Space Oddity* album was being finalized. "Mick came to the mix of 'Wild-Eyed Boy From Freecloud' and was persuaded to play a little guitar line in the middle part and joined in the handclaps on the same section," he says. But if he did, he isn't credited. Ronno's first recorded work with Bowie was on the remade and rocked-out single "Memory of a Free Festival Part 1/Part 2," recorded in September 1969 and released to zero chart success in June 1970.

In April, sessions began for *The Man Who Sold the World*, featuring the core band of Bowie, Ronson, Visconti and former Rats drummer Mick "Woody" Woodmansey. It was a brilliant album, full of Ronson's crunching heavy-metal attack allied to arcane Wagnerian, dystopian lyrics. His contributions to Bowie tracks such as "She Shook Me Cold," "Running Gun Blues" and the epic "Width of a Circle" cemented his place in Bowie's orbit, leading the singer to call him, with a smug smile, "my Jeff Beck."

As it happened, both Bowie and Ronson were huge fans of Beck's *Truth* album. Marshall says, "[*Mick*] knew all the licks, except 'Beck's Boogie,' which he dissected but couldn't master. It infuriated him. In 1968, the Rats had supported Beck at the Cat Ballou in Grantham, and afterward Ronno asked him to show him the fast run at the beginning. So Beck plays it, and Mick says, 'No, play it slower.' Beck said, 'If I play it any slower, I'll stop!' But he was patient, and Mick learned that riff."

DEBI DOSS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

The Man Who Sold the World had not been a commercial breakthrough, but it added to Ronson's confidence. Visconti and Ronson had masterminded the sound and dashed off the arrangements, while Bowie canoodled with his new bride, Angie. "She Shook Me Cold," the dirtiest song he ever wrote, was directly about Mrs. Bowie, but it was Ronson who provided the Jimi Hendrix–style intro and the power-trio setting à la Cream. Later, Angie lamented the fact that Ronson didn't receive the publishing he deserved. "In terms of kudos and feeling that one is valued, it would have been nice for Mick Ronson to have had publishing credits," she said.

Visconti's departure from the group saw the arrival of bassist Trevor Bolder. It also gave Ronson his in. "[*Visconti had*] done all the string and piano

arrangements, so it was my chance to fill the gap," Ronson said. "I'd never done it before, but I could read and write music, and I'd watched Tony at Haddon Hall, writing in the basement, saw how he did the charts, and I'd help out."

Ronson had already written a mini-score for four recorders, used in the break of "All the Madmen." It was a start. "I thought, Well, if you can do that then so can I," he said. "I went out for dinner with [*singer*] Dana Gillespie, who had tracks that needed strings, and David said, 'Oh, Mick'll do that!' [*Like Bowie and Ronson, Gillespie was managed by Tony Defries' MainMan company.*] I never had, but it was great. David pushed me forward. That was his thing. He made stuff happen."

With Visconti gone, Bowie was now heavily reliant on Ronson. His next album, 1971's *Hunky Dory*, saw the emergence of his new quartet, featuring Ronson, Bolder and Woodmansey, a taut group that gave his folkie tunes their strong rock underpinnings. Ronson finally got his credit as the arranger of its songs "Changes," "Life on Mars?," "Kooks," "Quicksand" and the Biff Rose cover "Fill Your Heart," which was copied virtually note for note from the original. In retrospect, many have noticed how similar the sound of *Hunky Dory* is to Michael Chapman's *Fully Qualified Survivor*, the 1970 album on which Ronson had made his debut.

Ronson's burgeoning role extended to instructing hired gun Rick Wakeman for his now iconic piano parts on "Life on Mars?" The Royal College of Music–trained keyboardist (and future Yes member) didn't mind the input. "He was a tremendous human being, with oodles of talent," Wakeman said.

Bowie producer/engineer Ken Scott points to "the great orchestral versions that Ronno put together. [*They're*] even more brilliant when you consider he had this habit of running out of time. I remember him rushing in 10 minutes before the session, running up to the bathroom and locking himself in so he could find the privacy to finish writing. He'd come out with a huge grin and a stack of charts."

By the time the band assembled for the followup, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars*, Ronson's talents were in full bloom. On the epic "Five Years," his string section whipped up the hysteria, while on "Suffragette City," it was Ronno who came up with the funky, lurching ARP synthesizer sound that many mistake for saxophones.

But working with Bowie had its challenges for Ronson, a now 25-year-old who, until recently, had been a practicing Mormon. In January 1972, shortly before the *Ziggy Stardust* sessions were complete, Bowie told *Melody Maker* he was gay, or, more accurately, bisexual. Ronson admitted he found it hard to deal with at first. "It embarrassed me," he said. "I wondered what people would say about me. I knew my family in Hull would get flak. I gave dad a car when I left for London, and people threw red paint over it." Aside from his own feelings about it, Ronson understood Bowie was playing with his image as a way to keep the media engaged. "Personally, it was a bit of a shock," he admitted, "but Bowie manipulated the media again and again."

ABOVE: Ronson with (from left) bassist Trevor Bolder, David Bowie and drummer Mick Woodmansey, in London, November 1972

OPPOSITE: With Bowie at the end of the *Ziggy Stardust* tour, Hammersmith Odeon, in London, July 3, 1973

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

With Mott the Hoople bassist Pete Overend Watts

Overall, Ronson approached the *Ziggy Stardust* project with slight suspicion. The explicitness of "Suffragette City" and the discarded track "Sweet Head" concerned him. "He worried about the lyrics," Angie says. "I told him. 'Look, all these people are waving their arms in freedom thanks to you. It may not be what you're used to in Hull, but accept it.' Then he'd simmer down and be happy."

"MICK WAS THE PERFECT FOIL FOR THE ZIGGY CHARACTER. AS A ROCK DUO, I THOUGHT WE WERE AS GOOD AS MICK AND KEITH"
– DAVID BOWIE

If *Ziggy Stardust* was a Ronson tour de force, the follow-up, *Aladdin Sane*, was a mixed blessing for him. His contributions were immense, but so were those of recently arrived pianist Mike Garson, whom Ronson had auditioned and later advised to "make yourself indispensable. That's what David likes. Don't just be a session man."

Certainly, Ronson lived up that credo. His work on Lou Reed's *Transformer*, produced with Bowie the August after *Ziggy Stardust*, effectively rescued Reed's career after his debut solo album had bombed. "It was a good experience for me," Ronno said. "Lou's guitar was always out of tune, so I'd kneel in front of him and tune it properly. He didn't care, 'cause he was so laid-back." Without his contribution, *Transformer* might never have got off the ground. "It came out pretty well," Ronson said. "Though I didn't know what the hell [*Lou*] was talking about half the time. He'd say stuff like: 'Can you make it sound a bit more grey?'"

Fortunately the album was a roaring success. "*Transformer* is easily my best-produced album," Reed said. "That has a lot to do with Mick Ronson. His influence was stronger than David's, but together, as a team, they're terrific."

By 1973, though, it seemed that Ronson had become dispensable, along with Woody Woodmansey and Trevor Bolder, both of whom had been dropped for having the gall to protest when they discovered that new arrival Garson was making 10 times their salary. The guitarist's relations with Bowie were frosty when, on October 20,1973, Ronson played with Bowie onstage for the last time in that decade. Only 200 people saw the appearance in the flesh, shot for NBC's *The Midnight Special*. Dubbed "The 1980 Floor Show," the concert featured Bowie serenading French singer/actress/model Amanda Lear with "Sorrow," a 1966 hit for the Merseys that Bowie would record for 1973's *Pin Ups*, an album on which he covered songs from the Swinging London era. He and singer Marianne Faithfull also duetted on Sonny & Cher's "I Got You Babe." But Bowie hated the end result, which he derided as "shot abysmally." This was the night Ziggy Stardust truly left the building, which may explain why a smiling Bowie ended each song with an affectionate pat on Ronson's white satin-clad back.

As the wingman was increasingly sidelined, MainMan, his and Bowie's mutual management company, promised him the earth. He was to be the next superstar off the production line, said manager Tony Defries. In the summer of '73, having finished his sessions for *Pin Ups*, most of which he'd arranged, as usual, Ronson returned to the Château d'Hérouville studios outside Paris and made his solo debut album, *Slaughter on 10th Avenue*. Bowie chipped in from a distance, gifting the songs "Growing Up and I'm Fine," "Pleasure Man/Hey Ma, Get Papa" and "Music Is Lethal." RCA weren't overjoyed with what it heard, and the album's release date was put back more than six months, to 1974.

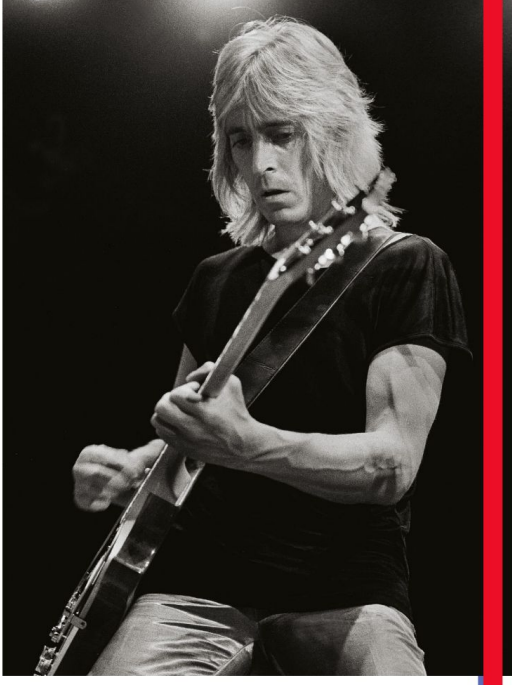
Within months, Ronson was back in another band, joining Mott the Hoople for what would be their final single, "Saturday Gigs." Ronson and frontman Ian Hunter had bonded back when Mick had knocked out a string arrangement for Mott's "Sea Diver," but the other band members resented the arrival of this "rock star" in their midst, with MainMan and RCA sending limos for their boy while Mott traveled together in a bus. Tired of the conflict, Hunter split the band.

Ronson went back to his solo career. Bowie didn't take part in the follow-up album, *Play Don't Worry*, but he allowed Ronson to use the backing track from their cover of the Velvet Underground's "White Light/White Heat," which had been recorded for an American attempt at a *Pin Ups* album that was discarded soon after. *Play Don't Worry* was excellent in parts. Although he wasn't a natural songwriter, Ronson did himself proud on the opening "Billy

JORGEN ANGEL/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

BOY COULD HE PLAY GUITAR

WE EXAMINE THE TECHNIQUE AND TONE OF THE LATE, GREAT MICK RONSON



PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES

MICK RONSON IS arguably the best-loved and most iconic of Bowie's guitar slingers. His playing techniques were eccentric, but they worked. One unusual attribute was that, unlike most other guitarists, he kept his left-hand fingernails fairly long. He claimed that this enabled him to get his nails under the strings to create the kind of extreme vibrato (shown off to devastating effect on Bowie's "The Width of A Circle") that led some listeners to believe he was using a trem, or play extraordinary bends that sounded like he was deploying a slide. To this end, he kept his guitars subtly detuned, preferring to bend a slightly flattened string into pitch. His idol Jeff Beck used to do something similar during his Yardbirds years.

Few major guitarists have ever seemed fundamentally less interested in gear than Ronson. Though he did indeed carry backup instruments on tour (and did occasionally use them), Ronno concentrated primarily on one main guitar at a time. His most famous guitar throughout the Bowie years and beyond was his stripped 1968 Les Paul Custom [*see page 50*], which he had bought new in 1968 and played until it was literally worn-out — the neck had been broken and repaired one time too many — and Ronson eventually donated it to the Hard Rock Cafe in Australia. Thereafter, he switched to a blue rosewood-"board Telecaster, which sustained him through the remainder of his career (though studio pics shot during the *Heaven and Hull* sessions show him with a white, Floyd Rose–loaded, maple-fretboard, single-humbucker Superstrat of unknown provenance). He reverted back to Les Pauls, or other humbucker-loaded guitars, for his slide work.

From the Spiders era through his ill-fated solo career, his even more ill-fated tenure with Mott the Hoople, and during his first collaboration with Ian Hunter, Ronson's amp of choice was a 200-watt Marshall Major head (the same model favored by Ritchie Blackmore) through a single Marshall 4x12. When he relocated to the U.S., he discovered Mesa/Boogies and used them for most of the rest of his life (apart from a brief flirtation with Music Man amps during the sessions for Hunter's *You're Never Alone With a Schizophrenic* album and the subsequent tour immortalized on the *Welcome to the Club* live album), preferring a combo for studio work and a Mesa head with Marshall cab for live work. Despite using a Marshall Supa Fuzz and a Tonebender, owned previously — allegedly — by Pete Townshend to generate added grit during his tenure with the Spiders, Ronno's main tonal "secret weapon" was his Vox wah pedal, generally left stationary somewhere near the midpoint of its sweep.

SOUL LOVE

HOW RICK TEDESCO FOUND AND LOST HIS DREAM GUITAR: MICK RONSON'S *ZIGGY STARDUST*-ERA 1968 GIBSON LES PAUL CUSTOM.

BY CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI

FOR YEARS AFTER Mick Ronson's death, the whereabouts of his stripped 1968 Gibson Les Paul Custom — the *Ziggy Stardust* guitar — were a mystery even to those who had been closest to him. When Rick Tedesco asked Ronson's friend and fellow performer Ian Hunter about it, the former Mott the Hoople frontman shrugged. "God only knows where that went," he replied. "Mick probably gave it to some guy walking across the street. He didn't care about gear. It was just a tool to him."

For Tedesco, finding the guitar became a mission. A guitarist, producer and engineer whose credits include work with Hunter, Alice Cooper and former Cooper band members Dennis Dunaway and Neal Smith, Tedesco had become a Bowie fanatic through the artist's 1974 album, *Diamond Dogs*. "I was a 13-year-old kid who was just obsessed with horror movies," he recalls. "And then I saw that album cover. I just absolutely loved that album. I was like, 'I'm done. That's what I want to do.' " Working his way backward through Bowie's catalog, he soon discovered Ronson's signature performances on the albums *Hunky Dory*, *Ziggy Stardust*, *Aladdin Sane* and *Pin Ups*. Eventually he caught D.A. Pennebaker's 1973 *Ziggy Stardust* concert film on television. "There was Mick," he recalls. "And that's what I wanted to be — David Bowie's guitarist."

Rick Tedesco with Mick Ronson's 1968 Gibson Les Paul Custom

Tedesco was particularly drawn to Ronson's Les Paul Custom. Originally a Black Beauty, the guitar was stripped in 1970 after Ronson heard that removing the finish could improve resonance and high-frequency tone. He subsequently used it on his first record with Bowie, *The Man Who Sold the World*, right through *Hunky Dory*, *Ziggy Stardust*, *Aladdin Sane* and *Pin Ups*, making it the vehicle for each album's searing power chords, singing leads and lyrical solos. For Tedesco, a hardcore Bowie and Ronson fan, the guitar was an indelible part of his own identity as a guitarist.

By the 1990s, he was working at a music store in Danbury, Connecticut, when one day Hunter strolled in. "Ian happened to live about 45 minutes away at the time," he says. "I was like, Holy shit, it's Ian Hunter! I even had posters of him and Mick on my wall." Hunter made repeat visits, and a friendship developed after Tedesco helped him refurbish his studio with an ADAT system. "Mick had passed, and Ian didn't really know what the hell to do," Tedesco says. "He didn't have his right-hand man anymore. So he started asking me, 'Do you want to put some stuff down on this song?'" Before he knew it, Tedesco was working with Hunter, who also introduced him to some members of Alice Cooper's camp.

"IT WAS WHERE I WAS FORGED. IT PUT ALL OF MY PARTS TOGETHER AND MADE ME GO, AH, THERE'S A PLACE FOR ME ON PLANET EARTH!"

Hunter still had several of Ronson's guitars, which he was holding onto for Suzi, Mick's wife, but the stripped Les Paul Custom wasn't among them. "Nobody knew where it was," Tedesco says. "I did some research and talked to one guy who thought he remembered an interview where Mick said he'd given it to the Hard Rock Cafe." Tedesco began calling Hard Rock locations, asking if they had the guitar, but a sweep of the company's database came up empty. "They had nothing of his at all," he says. Afterward, Tedesco's source confirmed that the guitar had gone to the Hard Rock, adding that the restaurant was located in Australia. Because that facility is licensed from, but not owned by, the Hard Rock, its holdings weren't listed in the company's records. Tedesco felt a glimmer of hope.

One call to the restaurant was all it took. "I asked a guy there if they had Mick's guitar, and he said, 'Yeah, I'm standing right next to it,'" Tedesco says. "They had it hanging on the wall. I went through the roof."

As it happened, the Hard Rock was open to a trade if Tedesco could give them a guitar to replace it. "A lot of people like myself are huge fans of Mick's, but he wasn't a giant marquee name, so they didn't really care about the

COURTESY OF RICK TEDESCO

guitar," he explains. He offered them a small collection that included some guitars signed by Hunter as well as some bearing Gene Simmons' signature, and the deal was done. It wasn't without complications, though. In his excitement, Tedesco accidentally addressed his package to Newcastle, rather than Castle Hill, Australia. His guitars spent six weeks lost in a UPS lockup until the error was discovered.

Soon after, Ronson's guitar showed up at his house. "I had been out running some errands and got home to find this box leaning against my garage door," Tedesco recalls. "I was so excited. And then I opened it up and saw a headstock. There was no case. The guitar came all the way from Australia covered in bubble wrap." To his relief, it made the trip unscathed, and with a bit of cleaning of its electronics, it was back in action

For Tedesco, who'd purchased his childhood home after his parents retired, the coolest part of the experience was playing Ronson's Les Paul in the very room where he'd first discovered the guitarist in the *Ziggy Stardust* film. "It was such a weird cosmic circle," he says. Over the years, he put the guitar to good use. In addition to the Les Paul Custom, he's owned Ronson's Marshall Major head, among other gear, and two-inch tapes from the guitarist's studio. He made a video of his collection, allowing fans to see and hear these instruments for the first time in years. He also loaned the guitar to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and shared it with fans who stopped by the Guitar Hangar (guitarhangar.com), the musical instrument shop he opened in 1999. Eventually, he offered a limited-edition Mick Ronson Tribute Guitar based on the Les Paul Custom. "I did all this with no intention of doing anything but sharing what I had with the Mick-loving world," he says.

But eventually, Tedesco began receiving offers to buy the guitar. In 2014, he rejected one for $50,000 from producer Bob Rock, funneled to him by Suzi Ronson. Soon after, a fan from England — Simon Dolan, the multimillionaire entrepreneur and race car driver — asked about buying both the guitar and Ronson's Marshall Major head.

"'It would have to be for stupid money, and I'm not looking to sell,'" Tedesco recalls telling him. "I said it would take at least 200 thousand, just for the guitar alone. And he goes, 'Done!' And I thought, Oh god. Did I just sell my Mick Ronson guitar?"

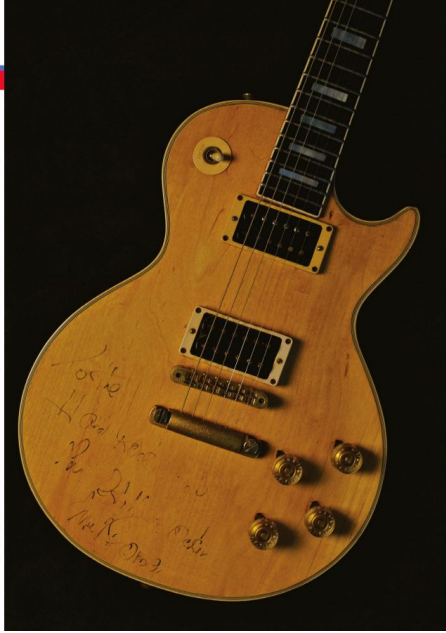
Two days later, the wire transfer came through his bank. "I cried," Tedesco says. "I'd never been so sad and sick over selling something.

"I called Ian up, crying, and he started laughing at me," he says, cracking up at the memory. "He said, 'You silly bastard! Mick would tell you you're a fucking wanker. That's why you buy something like that. It's an investment. And it paid off!'

"But I felt like I had sold my soul. It took me several months to get over that."

In the end, the money went to good use. At the time, Tedesco was getting ready for the grand opening of a new and larger Guitar Hangar in Brookfield, Connecticut, the store's current location. "It allowed me to open in style, with tons of gear and without going into massive debt," he says.

"But owning that guitar was never ever about money. I knew it was worth a lot, but I never envisioned parting with it. It was where I was forged. It put all of my parts together and made me go, Ah, there's a place for me on planet Earth! And then it was gone."



Ronson's *Ziggy Stardust* guitar as photographed by Lisa S. Johnson and featured in her 2016 book *108 Rock Star Guitars*. The body still shows signs of Ronson's message and signature from when he gave it to the Hard Rock Cafe. Johnson's latest book is *Immortal Axes: Guitars That Rock*, edited by Brad Tolinski.

LISA S. JOHNSON

Porter," "Empty Bed" and versions of two songs by Pure Prairie League, whose 1972 album *Bustin' Out* featured his guitar and string arrangements.

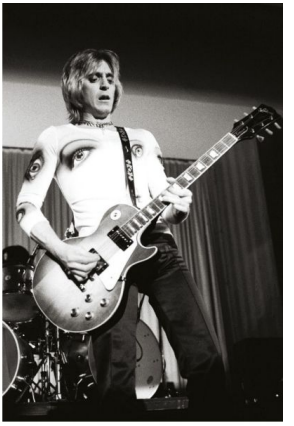
"'TRANSFORMER' IS EASILY MY BEST-PRODUCED ALBUM. THAT HAS A LOT TO DO WITH MICK RONSON"
– LOU REED

While *Slaughter on 10th Avenue* was being mixed, Ronson returned to the studio with Bowie to create demos for the future *Diamond Dogs* tracks "1984" and "Dodo." His work wouldn't appear on the finished album, a creepy, avant-garde affair, but his trademark guitar style did in the shape of "Rebel Rebel," almost a Spiders From Mars pastiche riff, played now by Bowie. According to Ronson's wife, Suzi, "When Mick heard *Diamond Dogs*, he wasn't exactly depressed. He just thought, Oh, that's Dave going out on a limb. But he would have done that record like a shot."

Instead Ronson embarked on a mercifully brief solo tour, including a show at London's Rainbow Theatre in February 1974, where he had strings and woodwind sections and, on backing vocals, the Thunderthighs — Karen Friedman, Dari Lalou and Casey Synge — who famously appeared on Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side" and Mott the Hoople's "Roll Away the Stone." Cast into the spotlight, Ronson didn't appear overly confident. The ultimate sideman was too modest to carry this off. Bowie watched on from the wings and offered words of encouragement during the intermission, but decided against making a guest appearance.

ABOVE: With the Hunter Ronson Band in Bristol, England, April 1, 1975

BELOW: Ronson (center) with Bob Dylan (left) on the Rolling Thunder Revue December 2, 1975



FRANK LENNON/TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES (ROLLING THUNDER); IAN DICKSON/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES (RONSON)

After Bowie, where does one go? Ronson produced and played on Ian Hunter's self-titled 1975 debut solo album. That same year, he moved to New York City, rented a place on Hudson Street near the Meatpacking District and enjoyed the city with his best friend Hunter, who had provided safe haven via Mott the Hoople, Mott, and the Hunter Ronson Band.

This is where they met Bob Dylan, who invited Ronson to join his band of gypsies, the Rolling Thunder Revue, after a meet engineered by Dylan's main fixer, Bob Neuwirth. That evening began at the Bitter End, on Bleecker Street.

"We weren't Dylan fans at all," Suzi Ronson says. "Mick thought he sounded like Yogi Bear. But Ian took us anyway, and Dylan played [*his 1976*] *Desire* album, and he was mezmerising, better than David. Then we went to the Bottom Line, where Mick got thrown out three times for being drunk and disorderly."

Back at the Bitter End, Hunter recalls "the whole place going insane 'cause Dylan was singing with Neuwirth and Ramblin' Jack Elliott. And Neuwirth [*sees*] Mick and says to Dylan, 'Go and ask him!'"

In Ronson's version, "[*Neuwirth*] was with this guy," he recalled. "And I looked at this bloke he was with and thought, Wait a minute, I know you! And, of course, it was Dylan. And we talked, and he said, 'We're going on the road. Why don't you come with us?' I honestly thought it was a hoax. Then Dylan phoned me, said the tour was going to happen and would I be there? Like a shot!"

"That tour rescued Mick's professional life," Suzi says.

BETTER DAYS

A promising blues guitarist in the early 1990s, **Larry McCray** spent the past 20 years in the wilderness. Thanks to a restart and a new album, *Blues Without You*, his future looks brighter than ever.

BY MARK McSTEA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PEGGY SMITH

LARRY McCRAY'S NEW album, *Blues Without You*, is his first record of original material since 2007. McCray burst onto the scene as a major new voice in blues guitar way back in 1991, with the release of his debut album, *Ambition*, followed two years later by *Delta Hurricane*. It looked like he was destined for the sort of mainstream crossover appeal enjoyed by the likes of Robert Cray and Stevie Ray Vaughan, but his blues train started to derail. By 2001, without a record deal, McCray was releasing his music on his own label. He'd resigned himself to the possibility that his major-label days were behind him, when Joe Bonamassa called to ask if he'd record for Bonamasssa's label, KTBA (Keeping the Blues Alive).

The result is *Blues Without You*, not only McCray's career-best record but also one of the strongest blues albums released for many years. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that there will be a better blues record released in 2022. McCray presents the same kind of two-fisted combo that made giants like B.B. and Freddie King such formidable artists, with not only the ability to play blisteringly effective solos but also a voice that can rival the best blues singers from any bygone age. McCray's soloing is both fluid and visceral; he is unafraid to hang on to a couple of notes until every last drop of emotion and soul has been wrung from them.

The release of *Blues Without You* will be accompanied by a documentary that

reveals the ins-and-outs of McCray's hookup with Bonamassa, and shows both men and co-producer Josh Smith working out ideas for the record. The film also demonstrates that McCray's stalling career was in part due to poor management from his former manager, Paul Coch, who died in 2021 in a car accident. It makes for compelling viewing and reveals McCray to be a deeply humble, emotional man who truly appreciates getting a second bite of the cherry.

"I CALL MY MUSIC 'GOOD-TIME, FEEL-GOOD MUSIC.' I WANT TO WIN THE HEARTS AND SOULS OF PEOPLE — WHAT PEOPLE FEEL IN THEIR HEART"

It must feel good to be back on a label that has prominence in the industry.

Yes, absolutely. Sometimes, when things don't work out, you have to make peace with yourself. That's what I was doing, and then the opportunity just kind of fell into my lap. I am very pleased with how the record turned out. It's my best album by far.

In the documentary, you use an acoustic guitar to perform many of the songs that subsequently turned up on the album in electrified form. They were such strong performances. Was there ever any thought of recording them that way?

I've been trying to get that done for the last 25 years, and I couldn't. I've never been one to use race as an excuse for what you can't achieve. I don't know if my image wasn't palatable to the people who make these decisions, who had the control, or if they just weren't interested in my brand of music. But with that said, there was never a plan to make this anything but an electric album.

Larry McCrazy stretches out on his Les Paul.

ARNIE GOODMAN

Watching the documentary, you seem very humble about your own talents. Do you think perhaps the way that your career became derailed undermined your sense of where you should be in terms of recognition?

I guess it's not really that important what I think about my music; it's what the people think. I've spent over 40 years making music, and if somebody wanted to give me an opportunity, it's not like I sat on my ass and didn't work for it. I've played every honky-tonk and every dive. I've played some high places and some low places, and a lot in-between. If the powers that be don't accept what you do, there are some doors that you can't open yourself. I put albums out on my own label, and I worked constantly, but I never had the means to promote them properly.

There are some parallels with you and your label mate Eric Gales, in that you both lost your way career-wise for some time, and now you've both just released career-best albums on KTBA.

I knew Eric at the start of his career. We've been friends since the late '80s. Eric was always my go-to when anybody was talking about who was a great blues guitarist. He was such a talent even then; I knew him when he was just a kid. He used to come out to my house and we'd sit up late playing guitar. He'd play guitar and I'd listen. [*laughs*] I'm a non-political and a non-controversial person, but when you look at it straight on, I wonder how people could justify why someone like Eric or me couldn't get opportunities in the music business. I think, fundamentally, sometimes people can get judged by two different standards. I've been away from the game too long to just make that a focus, but I know I worked my ass off to do everything that I could.

***Blues Without You* is a very organic, timeless album. Was that a deliberate attempt to re-create the warmth of those classic blues albums from the early 1970s that B.B. and Albert cut?**

I don't have to try, because that's who I am. I'm just being myself. When I look back on my career, that's what I've always been, and I guess that's just how it comes out. [*laughs*]

I feel like there are a lot of church and gospel influences in your vocals, but I believe that wasn't something you grew up with.

No. I was raised around that, but I was raised differently. I was raised as a Jehovah's Witness, so I didn't get the chance to pursue that gospel side of music. My parents converted to that when I was about six years old. I did hear that music, and it had an influence on me, for sure.

Along with the Les Paul, McCray's Flying V is one of his main axes.

You are the kind of singer who sounds like they're living every word that they say, so presumably the lyrics of a song are very important to you.
I sing about life. And I sing about it in a way that everyone can relate to, whether it's being sick, not having money, relationship problems or whatever it might be. I feel every word that I'm singing. We all need to feel whole, and I hope that's what my music helps people to achieve. I call my music "good-time, feel-good music." I don't want to be technical or nothing, trying to win the respect of people who care about those things; I want to win the hearts and souls of people — what people feel in their heart.

You always have great phrasing on your solos and fills. A prime example of this is your playing on "Without Love It Doesn't Matter," where you leave gaps between phrases, almost as if to allow the listener time to digest what you just played.
Exactly, that's right. It isn't necessary to play any more than that. Whenever I play something on my guitar, I try to channel what I call the four greats: B.B., Freddie and Albert King, and Albert Collins. I think of Albert Collins as the razor. He slashed, cut and sliced with his guitar. B.B. was class and elegance. Freddie was raw power with both his vocals and guitar. And Albert King played the crying, weeping guitar. My playing draws from all those four guys every time I take a solo. If I want cut, elegance, power or a real weeping feel, I tap into one of those four guys.

"No More Crying" is such a great southern soul ballad with the same emotional resonance of Vince Gill's "Go Rest High on That Mountain" and an ability to comfort someone dealing with loss.
I co-wrote that with a youngster that I influenced, Aaron Sarkar, who was 30 years my junior. We met at a B.B. King concert when he was working in hospitality there. He was 15 years old at the time, and I remember him saying that he wanted a musical career. Fifteen years later, he came to my house and he was showing me some words that he'd written. He said they'd come to him and he wrote them down in about five minutes. As soon as he read the words to me, I automatically had those chord changes. I just sang it exactly as it is, the first time I tried it. It just came in an instant. It was the easiest song I ever wrote.

The turnaround in your career is very much echoed by the sentiment behind "Don't Put Your Dreams to Bed."

Definitely. I wrote that with my girlfriend, Peggy Smith. We thought of that concept together. That was another song that was real easy to put together. I think a lot of the best songs do come very easily, as if they were just meant to be.

"IT'S NOT LIKE I SAT ON MY ASS AND DIDN'T WORK FOR IT. I'VE PLAYED EVERY HONKY-TONK AND EVERY DIVE"

It is interesting that the song "Blues Without You" was dedicated to your former manager, Paul Coch. Obviously you had plenty of good times together, but I know he also caused problems for your career at times.

Although we had a lot of rough roads and went through some tough things together, I certainly didn't hate the man. We spent 34 years together, you know? He definitely did work very hard to try to help me get success, but he just didn't have the right people skills. For whatever reason, people sometimes found it hard to work with him. I know Joe had tried to contact me years ago to do this, but Paul didn't tell me. That was just one of many incidents that happened over the years. In some ways there wasn't a whole lot that I could have done. Maybe I could have found another manager, but I couldn't find someone else who was interested.

The closing track, "I Play the Blues," is a solo acoustic and vocal piece, which is a great way to close the album, as a real contrast to what has gone before.

I did think that we were going to do it with the band, but Joe thought it would be nice to do the stripped-down acoustic version. We did the whole album in seven days, and that was the last song that we recorded. I did a lot of singing and playing in that week, and by that time my voice was starting to feel a little rough. Joe thought the slight rawness in my voice really worked for the song, although I do think that maybe I could have sung it better if I'd had a chance for my voice to recover slightly. But that's all that I had left.

When it comes to playing solos, do you plan beforehand what you'll do?

No, I never do. I always just play straight through without any preparation, in one pass or maybe two passes at the most. I do like to warm my chops up before I record, maybe for an hour or so.

ARNIE GOODMAN

SMART MONEY

Inside Joe Bonamassa's drive to keep the blues alive in school.

JOE BONAMASSA'S KEEPING the Blues Alive label certainly lives up to its name. Not only has it brought neglected figures such as Larry McCray and Eric Gales back into the spotlight but it's helped raise more than one million dollars to support struggling musicians and fund blues education programs. The label's previous releases include Dion's 2020 all-star hook-up *Blues With Friends*, as well as a pair of 2021 albums from Joanne Shaw Taylor (*The Blues Album*) and Joanna Connor (*4801 South Indiana Avenue*).

Bonamassa and his manager, Roy Weisman, founded the label with a mission to preserve arts education, with 10 percent of profits going toward donations of musical instruments and supplies to schools in need. Their ultimate goal is to ensure blues culture and history are embraced and recognized for years to come. Bonamassa spoke with *Guitar Player* about his label's purpose and ambitions.

When you sign an act, is it with a vision and a plan for a long-term career commitment or more to raise their profile and see how things pan out?
Each artist is different. For some, we have longer-term plans, while for others we're just trying to give them a boost so that people recognize their incredible talent. So far we have been able to secure a number one *Billboard* blues album for all of our acts. We are really proud of that. Plus, it gives the artists bragging rights.

It must feel satisfying when you see the artists get the respect they deserve.
Yes. I have felt so proud of Larry McCray's new album. He's one of a kind and one of the nicest people on this earth. I want to try and help the world rediscover how truly incredible he is. There are so many amazing artists out there, and sometimes the industry leaves them in the dust. We try to swoop in and help where we can. Since we're an independent label, we can't help everybody, but if we help some, it will all be worth it. — *MM*

To support KTBA in its mission to promote music and help working musicians, visit keepingthebluesalive.org

MARK HORTON/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

What were you playing on the album?
I only took one guitar with me, a Les Paul Deluxe, as I was flying and I couldn't really take any more than that. I used a lot of Joe's guitars and amplifiers. Joe has so much great gear that there isn't anything that I could have taken with me that would have been any better anyway. [*laughs*]

You're very much a Gibson guy, although I believe way back you used to play a Strat.
That's right. In fact I played an Ibanez before the Strat. What happened was that I went over to England, and I saw Gary Moore playing. When I heard his humbuckers, I thought, Okay, there's a bigger bear in the woods; I need to keep up here. [*laughs*] As soon as I got back to the States, I bought a tobacco-brown Flying V, which I played a lot. That was when I also discovered that I really liked Les Pauls as well, and the 335 came soon after that. I like to switch my tones a lot, even in the middle of a solo, where I'll flip from one pickup to another. I know Albert King always did that. I think it takes the solo on more of a journey through different tonal ranges.

"I SAW GARY MOORE PLAYING. WHEN I HEARD HIS HUMBUCKERS, I THOUGHT, OKAY, THERE'S A BIGGER BEAR IN THE WOODS; I NEED TO KEEP UP HERE"

I imagine things are very busy for you now that the album is being released.
Yeah. I'm also doing some things with Devon Allman and the Allman Brothers Revue right now, and I'm starting to book a lot of dates for myself. Everything is really starting to build up, and I'm determined that I'm going to make the most of every opportunity to make up for a lot of lost time.

A GOOD YEAR *for the* ROSEWOOD

As Fender releases the George Harrison Rosewood Telecaster, we retrace the fascinating story of this iconic model with Fender historian Martin Kelly and a gorgeous 1969 original from its first, all-too-brief run.

BY ROD BRAKES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY OLLY CURTIS

DARK, HANDSOME, AND understated, the Fender Rosewood Telecaster has much in common with George Harrison. Custom-built for the guitarist in 1968 by Fender craftsmen Roger Rossmeisl and Philip Kubicki, it suited him down to the ground, although it was high on the roof of the Beatles' Apple Corps headquarters in London that this unique Tele design was unveiled, at the band's final public performance on January 30, 1969.

The origin of the Fender Rosewood Telecaster likely stems from a meeting at Apple Corp in 1968 set up by Don Randall, Leo Fender's original business partner and head of the company's sales division. Keenly aware of the importance of product placement, and having courted the Beatles for some time, Randall visited the band's Savile Row HQ, where he met with John Lennon, Yoko Ono and Paul McCartney.

"Don began supplying the Beatles with Fender equipment immediately following the meeting," explains Martin Kelly, guitar historian and co-author of *The Golden Age of Fender: 1946–1970*. "During the recording sessions for the White Album, he had already gifted the band a left-handed Jazz Bass for Paul, a right-handed Bass VI that both John and George used, and blackface Deluxe and Twin Reverb amps. By the time the recordings that would become *Let It Be* began in January 1969, the group had been kitted out with brand-new 'drip edge' silverface Twin Reverbs, a Bassman amp with a 2x15 cabinet, a Fender Rhodes electric piano and George's Rosewood Telecaster.

"GEORGE'S GUITAR WAS CHAMBERED — PERHAPS MORE SO THAN PRODUCTION MODELS — TO ALLEVIATE WEIGHT"

"You can see all this wonderful new gear, complete with hang tags, in *The Beatles: Get Back*. By this time, Fender had really made their move on the band and were becoming a big part of the Beatles' sound. It's scary to think that the rehearsals for *Let It Be* began just six weeks after the White Album had been released. In the meantime, Harrison had visited Bob Dylan and the Band in Woodstock, where he enjoyed a carefree, relaxed atmosphere. Suddenly he's back in the Beatles fold, and the atmosphere is very different indeed. But in the midst of it all, this new Fender gear — including the Rosewood Telecaster — has turned up."

Created by Rossmeisl and Kubicki, the new design appeared at a time when Fender was experimenting heavily with the Telecaster form. "The Rosewood

This 1969 Rosewood Telecaster comes from the model's first production year and features correct electronics, hardware, tuners and hardshell case.

A previous owner mounted the single-coil pickup to the pickguard after a mounting screw broke off in the body, a modification that was subsequently corrected.

Telecaster was introduced at the start of a new experimental phase for the Tele," Kelly confirms. "The first time Fender had experimented with the design was in 1959 with the introduction of the edge-bound Telecaster Custom. Next came the Blue Flower and Paisley Red Telecasters in 1968, along with the Rosewood Telecaster and the Thinline. The early '70s ushered in both the Custom [*a second version released in 1972*] and the Deluxe [*released in 1973*].

"In terms of pickups and electronics, the Rosewood Telecaster is completely standard, as per a regular Tele, with two single-coil pickups and simple volume and tone controls. As with the [*original*] Telecaster Thinline, Rossmeisl wasn't messing too much with convention." (The Telecaster Thinline changed to a dual Wide Range humbucker design later, in 1971.)

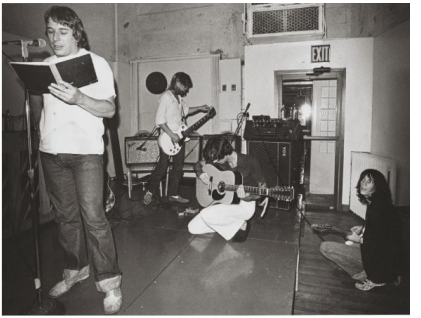
However, when it comes to tonewood, the Rosewood Telecaster was a radical departure from the standard Telecaster's traditional maple neck/ash body construction. "The first Rosewood Tele was constructed from four pieces of rosewood glued together — two on the top and two on the bottom," Kelly explains. "Harrison's prototype guitar was made from four bits of rosewood, whereas production examples seem mostly to be made using a solid slab of rosewood on the back and a solid slab on the front. All Rosewood Teles feature a thin layer of maple sandwiched in the center of the body.

"I ASKED WHY HE FITTED A PRE-CBS DECAL TO GEORGE'S PROTOTYPE. HE TOLD ME, 'I JUST REACHED FOR WHATEVER WAS ON MY DESK'"

"George's guitar was chambered — perhaps more so than production models — to alleviate weight. Rosewood is a dense wood, and production Rosewood Teles can often be very heavy, even though they're chambered. They vary a lot in terms of weight, but I'm reliably told George's guitar is lighter than most production examples."

Unlike the production models that soon followed, Harrison's prototype guitar was built using a rosewood neck with a glued-on rosewood fingerboard. Using this method of construction, the truss rod is placed into the front of the neck prior to the board being attached. This differs from Fender's original practice of making Teles with a one-piece fretted neck, where the truss rod is inserted into a channel in the back. Consequently, the tell-tale "skunk stripe" on the rear and the peghead plug on the front of the fretted neck are absent from his guitar.

"It's interesting, because this was the first time Fender had returned to the skunk stripe on Telecasters since the '50s," Kelly points out. "They weren't making any other guitars that way at the time, and you'll notice a maple [*peghead*] plug and skunk stripe running down the



LYNN GOLDSMITH/CORBIS/VCG VIA GETTY IMAGES

TOP: Ronson (second from left) in New York City with (from left) John Cale, David Byrne and Patti Smith, at the Ocean Club, July 21, 1976

Ronson was soon back with Hunter, appearing on *You're Never Alone With a Schizophrenic* and *Welcome to the Club*. With his solo career on hold, he became a full-time producer. He worked with Van Morrison, John Mellencamp, Roger McGuinn and Meat Loaf backup singer Ellen Foley. He even contributed guitar to the title track from David Cassidy's 1976 album, *Getting It in the Street*. Despite his signature guitar style and tone, Ronson became engrossed in writing string arrangements.

"He lapsed into the language of strings," Hunter says, "but he was a bit lazy, 'cause if it was interesting he'd do it using 15 tracks and one guitar track. He wrote arrangements on Marlboro Light fag packets. But he could be persnickety and picky if he was involved. He could have matured into a world-famous musician again, but he'd meet people on the street and, next thing, he's doing a Mexican punk band.

"But he was great with fans. He'd invite them back for tea, he'd return their phone calls. Sometimes he could be the big guy and show off, so he wasn't perfect, gorgeous as he was. I considered him like family, so there were arguments. One time he disappeared to Sweden for a project when we were in the middle of something, so I had a go. And he just said, 'Look, I've done Bowie and I've done you, so I'm allowed to fuck up,' and we just collapsed into laughter."

In the late 1980s, Ronson's health began to cause concern. He was diagnosed with liver cancer, something he neither made a secret of nor chose to acknowledge as a threat. Instead he threw himself into projects such as Morrissey's 1992 album, *Your Arsenal*. Speaking with *Classic Rock*, Morrissey said, "Mick told me that he alone wrote the main guitar hooks for 'Starman,' 'The Man Who Sold the World' and others — not just hooks, really, but grand choruses in themselves — but a share of publishing wasn't ever on offer for him. When you consider his solos in 'Time' and 'Moonage Daydream,' then you can guess that they were his own creations."

A fan of both Ronson and Bowie, Morrissey was intrigued by letters Bowie sent to his old guitarist chum during the making of *Your Arsenal*. "One day at breakfast, I asked Mick why Bowie wrote so often," Morrissey recalled, "and he said, 'He keeps asking me what you're like in the studio,' and then he exploded with laughter. I have no idea why this was so hilarious. I think Bowie had interest in Mick only as much as it was in his nature to like anyone."

Certainly, Bowie was impressed by *Your Arsenal* enough that he invited Ronson to work with him on his 1993 studio album, *Black Tie White Noise*. He also kicked off a fine version of "All the Young Dudes" with Bowie and Hunter at the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert at Wembley Stadium on Easter Monday, 1992, which was the last time his fans saw him onstage. One year later, on April 29, 1993, Ronson died of liver cancer at age 46. He spent his last hours in the company of Hunter, Suzi and sister Maggi at Tony Defries' house on Hasker Street in West London.

Ronson didn't die penniless, but he wasn't wealthy by rock star standards. "He bought the house in Woodstock on Glasco Turnpike [*in New York State*] because he made money out of my records and Ellen Foley's *Night Out*," Ian Hunter says. "His car was an old Toyota Corolla that sounded like a hair dryer."

Hunter summed up the gloomy finale in his Ronno elegy "Michael Picasso," from 1977's *The Artful Dodger*: "You turned into a ghost surrounded by your pain/And the thing that I liked the least was sitting round Hasker Street, lying about the future."

"What is remarkable is that he was so overlooked, and he still is," Morrissey said of Ronson. "Has Mick ever been on the cover of a major British music magazine? Even when he died? He was by nature extremely humble. He was just happy to be there."

Though he was the first of many great guitarists Bowie would adopt, champion and cast aside, Ronson continued to hold a place in his heart after their split, perhaps more than any other who followed him. "Mick was the perfect foil for the Ziggy character," Bowie admitted years afterward. "He was very much a salt-of-the-earth type, the blunt northerner with a defiantly masculine personality, so what you got was the old-fashioned yin-and-yang thing. As a rock duo, I thought we were as good as Mick and Keith."

"HE SAID, 'LOOK, I'VE DONE BOWIE AND I'VE DONE YOU, SO I'M ALLOWED TO F*CK UP,' AND WE JUST COLLAPSED INTO LAUGHTER"
– IAN HUNTER

All Rosewood Teles have a thin layer of maple sandwiched between two slabs of rosewood, as visible in the cutaway. BELOW: George Harrison, with Paul McCartney and John Lennon, performing with his Rosewood Tele on Apple Corps' rooftop.

back of the neck on all production Rosewood Teles.

"The prototype has a satin finish and a pre-CBS decal, but production guitars feature glossy poly finishes and transition decals. I imagine they used a thick gold transition logo because they wanted it to stand out. If they'd used a contemporary black CBS logo, it wouldn't have shown up against the dark rosewood." (Fender started using solid black peghead logo decals in 1967.)

"While interviewing Phil Kubicki for my Fender book, I asked why he fitted a pre-CBS decal to George's prototype, and he told me, 'Martin, I didn't care what type of decal I used. I just reached for whatever was on my desk and whatever was closest to hand. I was not thinking about whether the main factory had switched to a different type of decal; it just said 'Fender,' and that was all it needed to say.'"

Interestingly, a Rosewood Stratocaster intended for (though never received by) Jimi Hendrix was made alongside Harrison's guitar. This

prototype Strat also features a pre-CBS "spaghetti" logo.

"Phil Kubicki was Roger Rossmeisl's assistant in the R&D shop, and they made two Strats and two Teles," Kelly reveals. "I believe they knew the Tele was going to the Beatles, and that the Strat was intended for Jimi Hendrix. Phil told me he knew who they were making them for and there was a sense of urgency to get the Tele ready first. This instruction likely came following Don Randall's meeting with the Beatles at Savile Row, and I guess he had told

Rossmeisl, 'We're sending the Beatles some stuff. Can you get the Rosewood Telecaster ready first?'

"Roger and Phil constructed two necks and two bodies, but they only finished one of each guitar. Kubicki told me that was their standard procedure. They'd make two, just in case, and they'd pick the best of both. They selected the best neck and the best body to make George's guitar, and Phil told me he spent some time getting the satin finish just right by gradually working through grades of wet and dry to bring it to a certain type of sheen. He said it was at Roger Rossmeisl's request that the guitar was finished that way."

Having worked hard to get the Rosewood Telecaster completed, Fender flew the guitar over the pond (it had its own seat on the aircraft), and it was soon in Harrison's hands. "The Rosewood Tele prototype was sent over in late '68, and George was seen playing

"PHIL KUBICKI DIDN'T KNOW GEORGE HARRISON HAD USED HIS GUITAR UNTIL HE SAW THE ROOFTOP FILM OVER A YEAR LATER"

it in January '69. But in a pre-internet world, Fender didn't have any immediate photographic evidence. In fact, Phil Kubicki didn't know George Harrison had used his guitar until he saw the rooftop film over a year later! That was the first time he knew it had actually been used."

Nevertheless, within months of being created, the Rosewood Telecaster had popped up on Fender price lists. However, with a distinct lack of accompanying information, it was something of a mystery for customers, not to mention a relatively expensive option. "The Rosewood Tele first appeared on price sheets in May 1969, costing $375," Kelly says. "Versus a regular rosewood 'board Tele at $269.50, it was over a hundred dollars more. A maple cap Tele was $279.50 [*$10 more for a maple cap was standard then*]. The edge-bound Telecaster Custom and Paisley Red/Blue Flower Teles were $299.50. So the Rosewood Telecaster was far and away the most expensive at $375.

"The Rosewood Telecaster was on price sheets from May 1969 until April 1970, when it disappeared. It was dropped having never appeared in a single advert or catalog; it only ever showed up on price sheets. Who would even know what that was, or how to order it if they've never seen one in the flesh? The price list doesn't describe much; it just says 'Telecaster, (Dual Pickups) Rosewood.' So people wouldn't have known what they were ordering. It was a fleeting idea that was never publicized by Fender at the time.

"I guess the Fender sales team thought, The Beatles have taken one; let's build a few, put it on price sheets, and then see what happens. But there

was never any imagery of it provided by Fender. Perhaps they were just testing the water to see if the Beatles would really endorse it. The film *Let It Be* premiered in May 1970, just as the guitar was dropped and the Beatles split.

"The Rosewood Telecaster remained off Fender price lists throughout 1971 but reappeared in February 1972 marked 'new,' as if they'd never made it before, more than likely the result of demand created by the film. It was now $399.50 and on the same price list, a regular rosewood 'board Tele is $283, and a regular Tele with a maple cap [*fretboard*] is $295. By January 1973, it had disappeared into obscurity once again!"

In 1986, the Rosewood Telecaster briefly reappeared on Fender price lists as part of the Limited Edition Series. Made in Japan, these guitars were initially priced $699 and have garnered a reputation over the years for being reliable, high-quality instruments. "The mid-'80s Japanese reissues were quite accurate to the original production models," Kelly confirms.

Japanese-made Rosewood Telecasters were also offered in the '90s in Fender's Reissue Series, while the Custom Shop has revisited the design on several occasions over the years, launching the Rosewood Telecaster in 2007 to commemorate their 20th anniversary. Sporting the George Harrison–style

The guitar was fitted with reproduction F-style tuners at one point (two mounting holes from that mod are still visible in the top photo). It was subsequently fitted with correct ones.

specs of satin finish, a rosewood fretboard, no skunk stripe/plug and a pre-CBS decal, this run of instruments is easily identifiable by a neck plate that reads "Limited Release" alongside the Custom Shop logo and serial number.

"My late friend Alan Rogan [*Pete Townshend's guitar tech and guitar expert/collector*] had an early Custom Shop example with the George Harrison–style satin finish, rosewood 'board, and pre-CBS decal," Kelly recalls. "That was a fantastic guitar!"

In more recent years, Fender Custom Shop releases that feature the George Harrison–esque specs also include the 2013 Closet Classic Rosewood Telecaster (the neck plate reads "Limited Edition") and the 2016 Paul Waller Master Built George Harrison Rosewood Telecaster (with a "GH"-prefixed number inscribed on the back of headstock).

In 2017, Fender launched a limited run of 1,000 George Harrison Rosewood Telecasters. As you would expect, these guitars feature the prototype-style specs,

THE MAD AXE OF KING GEORGE

Finding Fretless author Paul Brett reveals how his relentless sleuthing uncovered the mysterious history of a most unusual Beatles guitar: George Harrison's "mad" Bartell fretless.

BY CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI

AS ONE OF the world's most famous guitarists, George Harrison was on the receiving end of some stunning and groundbreaking guitars, including a prototype Rickenbacker 360/12 12-string, in 1964, and a prototype Fender Rosewood Telecaster, in 1969. But as astute Beatles fans learned in recent years, in 1967 Harrison became the recipient of an unusual prototype fretless guitar built by the short-lived U.S. Bartell company. How the guitar came to be, and how Harrison came to own it, are among the subjects explored by British author Paul Brett in his recently published groundbreaking tome, *Finding Fretless: The Story of George Harrison's Mad Guitar* (This Day in Music Books).

Brett's interest in the guitar was spurred when his friend, veteran jazz-fusion guitarist Ray Russell, posted a cryptic message to his Facebook page to mark the Beatle's birthday on February 25, 2019, accompanied by a photo of a fretless guitar. "He took a little post on Facebook and said, 'I'm remembering George today. He gave me this old guitar. I don't know much about it,'" Brett recalls. "That just triggered my interest. It was a Bartell. I'd never heard of it."

Russell's post sent Brett on a journey to learn more about both Harrison's guitar and the Bartell brand, whose venture into fretless guitars in the 1960s is among the guitar world's most unusual evolutionary branches. At the heart of the story is Paul Barth, one of guitar's unsung heroes. "People don't talk much about Paul Barth," Brett says, "but he was really one of the founding fathers of the electric guitar."

Barth's introduction to the guitar industry came in the early 1920s, when he went to work for his uncle John Dopyera, inventor of the resonator guitar, at the National String Instrument Corporation. By the 1930s, Barth was working with George Beauchamp at Rickenbacker, collaborating with him on the Frying Pan electric and Beauchamp's design for a guitar pickup. In the early 1950s, he helped Leo Fender set up his Santa Ana assembly line and built many of the woodworking jigs from which necks and bodies were shaped for Stratocaster, Jazzmaster and Jaguar model guitars. His work even extended to Semie Moseley at Mosrite as well as Magnatone and Hohner. He launched his own Barth guitar brand in 1956, and in 1964 the Bartell company was created by owner and company president Ted Eugene Peckels and Barth, who served as director and head of design. The Bartell name was derived by combining Barth's and Peckels' surnames.

It was Tom Mitchell, a paint finisher at Bartell — he went on to create Mitchell Amplifiers — who suggested the company make a fretless guitar, around 1966 or 1967. "Ted Peckels said, 'That'll never take off,'" Brett relates. "But Paul Barth, being a designer and inventor, said, 'Yeah, let's give it a go and see what happens.'"

George Harrison referred to the Bartell fretless as his "mad" — as in crazy — guitar. Paul Brett points to various anomalies that underscore its provenance as a prototype, including mismatched tuners — four of which are slotted and two of which are through-the-post — and a tailpiece drilled for 12 strings rather than six. The maple neck has a rosewood fretboard and a Bakelite top, "but when you shine a light through it, you can actually see frets underneath," Brett explains, "indicating that they used a fretted neck."

A few prototypes were made, including two for Jimi Hendrix and one that Frank Zappa acquired in 1973 from a Guitar Center in California. How Harrison came to own one required some serious sleuthing on Brett's part. A vital lead came from his friend Richard Bennett, a guitarist with plays with Neil Diamond and Mark Knopfler, who owned a Bartell as his first guitar. Bennett related a story about Al Casey, the owner of Al Casey's Music Room retail outlet in Hollywood, sending a Bartell fretless to Harrison when the Beatle was staying at 1567 Blue Jay Way in Los Angeles in 1967. The home is famous as the place where Harrison wrote "Blue Jay Way," the haunting track from 1967's *Magical Mystery Tour*, while waiting for the arrival of Beatles press officer Derek Taylor, who'd lost his way in the fog.

While browsing the internet hoping to find a photo of the Beatles with the fretless guitar, Brett entered "Al Casey Bartell fretless" into a search engine and was rewarded with a vintage print ad for Al Casey's Music Room. "You must have heard about them by now, so come on in and see the Bartell fretless guitars and fretless basses," went the ad copy. Below the call to action was a cryptic parenthetical: "George Harrison got the first guitar, maybe if you hurry you can get the second one." The ad ran in *The Los Angeles Free Press* from the first week of September 1967, lending support to Bennett's story.

Brett then learned that on August 3, while in Hollywood, Harrison and Beatles assistant Neil Aspinall attended a recording session where guitarist Mike Deasy was playing one of Bartell's prototype hollow-bodied fretless guitars. Harrison spoke with Deasy about the instrument for 20 or 30 minutes before leaving. Afterward, Aspinall reportedly ordered a fretless guitar from Al Casey.

It's certain that the Bartell fretless made it to Abbey Road Studio. The guitar is documented in Beatles history through British DJ Kenny Everett's recorded interview with John Lennon. Their chat took place at Abbey Road Studio on June 6, 1968, shortly after the Beatles began recording the White Album. Lennon is playing the guitar, which can be heard on the recording. "What kind of guitar is that?" Everett asks at one point. "Very strange looking," Replies Lennon, "A fretless guitar."

"We know it was the Bartell, 'cause it's the only one they had," Brett says. From talking with others who knew Harrison, he learned that Lennon was more intrigued by the guitar than Harrison was. "He was more likely to pick it up and mess around with it when they were looking for a particular sound or effect."

But was the fretless guitar ever used on a recording by the Beatles? No documentation exists to support the notion, but Brett and others familiar with the tonal character of the instrument are convinced it appears on two White Album tracks: "Happiness Is a Warm Gun," where Brett believes it was used to perform the rubbery descending lick that precedes the lyric "I need a fix 'cause I'm going down"; and "Helter Skelter," where it would have been used along with other guitars. Brett says the sound of a fretless guitar is present and more apparent on the second take of "Helter Skelter," a version clocking in at 12 minutes and 54 seconds, some four and a half minutes of which appear on *Anthology 3*.

"The suggestion is that it may have been used on others, mainly for overdubs, not as the lead guitar or the main instrument," he says. "But you can certainly pick it out, because it is so unique."

Brett points to an absence of the bright tone that comes from the strings vibrating against a metal fret. "I think George called it 'fret sparkle,'" he says. Likewise, slides and bends sound different due to the absence of frets. Brett also notes the microtonal characteristics of intonation that come from imperfect fretboard fingering. "The fact that it was a hollowbody guitar as well adds a bit to [*the distinctive sound*]," he says. "And I'm hearing the pickups — they weren't great for volume as such."

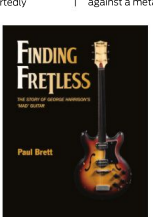
Ray Russell plays Harrison's Bartell fretless.

Though his research had proved where and how Harrison received the guitar, Brett was frustrated that he could find no photo of the instrument among pictures of the Beatles. But eventually his painstaking efforts paid off. "It took me months of searching through tens of thousands of photos," he says. "And there we had it: George Harrison at home with his collection of guitars." The photo, taken some time in the 1970s, shows Harrison in a room at his Friar Park estate surrounded by mostly acoustic guitars. "And there it is right at the back next to him," Brett reveals.

"TED PECKELS SAID, 'THAT'LL NEVER TAKE OFF.' BUT PAUL BARTH SAID, 'YEAH, LET'S GIVE IT A GO AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS'"

Harrison gifted the guitar to his friend Russell in 1985. In March 2020, it was featured on *Antiques Roadshow*, where it was valued at £400,000. Under the circumstances, Russell was unprepared to own and maintain an instrument of such value. On October 13, 2020, this least-famous Beatles guitar went on Bonhams' auction block, where it fetched a more conservative, but no less impressive, bid of £190,000 — roughly a quarter of a million dollars.

Brett's dogged efforts have helped unearth yet another piece of Beatles history, but what tends to get overshadowed in the story is how *Finding Fretless* shines light on a previously unexplored tract in guitar history through research and stories about Barth, Bartell and other fretless guitars and their owners. For his contributions, Brett has been nominated by the Association for Recorded Sound Collections Awards (ARSC) to receive its 2022 award for Excellence in Historical Recorded Sound Research. NAMM has also asked him to contribute to its oral history program when he's in Anaheim for the annual musical instrument show this June. "We're hoping to have a reunion of Bartell while we're there," Brett says, "and give Paul Barth some of the recognition he deserves."



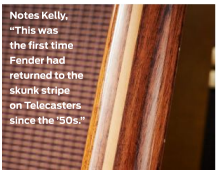
PHOTOS COURTESY OF PAUL BRETT

Below the surface, the bridge pickup's two connection wires are yellow, a feature of this year. As with most if not all Teles from this time, the pot dates are from the 34th week of 1966, due to Fender having purchased a large stash of them that year.

and they are set apart by a neckplate marked with an Om symbol and Harrison's signature.

With 2021's *The Beatles: Get Back* documentary series creating a renewed interest in arguably Fender's most iconic prototype guitar, the George Harrison Rosewood Telecaster was re-released this year. As per the 2017 iteration, Fender's latest Rosewood Tele offering sports the Om/signature neckplate and features a chambered body, 9 ½–inch radius fingerboard and 1964-style pickups. Priced at $2,899.99, the guitar is touted as a "limited edition tribute."

"The current Fender George Harrison Rosewood Telecaster looks impressive,"



Notes Kelly. "This was the first time Fender had returned to the skunk stripe on Telecasters since the '50s."

Kelly remarks. "Overall, I think the design was a nice, subtle rework of the regular Tele, and George Harrison put it to phenomenal use.

"Rosewood Telecasters definitely have their own sound. To my ears, they sound springy. Because rosewood is so dense, it adds a bounce to the sound. They have a thicker, deeper, darker twang. I think the chambering affects things too; they have a different acoustic resonance. I'd be keen to know why Harrison's is lighter than other Rosewood Teles. Perhaps because it's more extensively chambered?"

"THE ROSEWOOD TELECASTER WAS DROPPED, HAVING NEVER APPEARED IN A SINGLE ADVERT OR CATALOG. IT ONLY EVER SHOWED UP ON PRICE SHEETS"

Be it the prototype or production-style design, Fender's Rosewood Telecaster reissues collectively outnumber the late '60s/early '70s models by a long way. Educated guesses put shipping figures of the original runs in the low hundreds.

"Original '69–'72-era Rosewood Teles are few and far between, and I'd be surprised if more than 250 to 300 were made," Kelly states. "There were other quirky Fender models, like the Swinger, that were never advertised by the company. Weirdly though, they did a fair amount for the Custom — the cut-down hockey-stick headstock 'bits-er' guitar that appeared in the 1970 catalog and period ads. Maybe Fender was backing the wrong horse!" ■

Martin Kelly is the co-author of The Golden Age of Fender: 1946-1970 *(Cassell Illustrated). His latest book,* Rickenbacker Guitars: Out of the Frying Pan Into the Fireglo, *is available via Phantom Books* ***(phantombooks.com).*** Guitar Player *thanks ATB Guitars in the U.K. for showing us the Fender Rosewood Telecaster featured here.*

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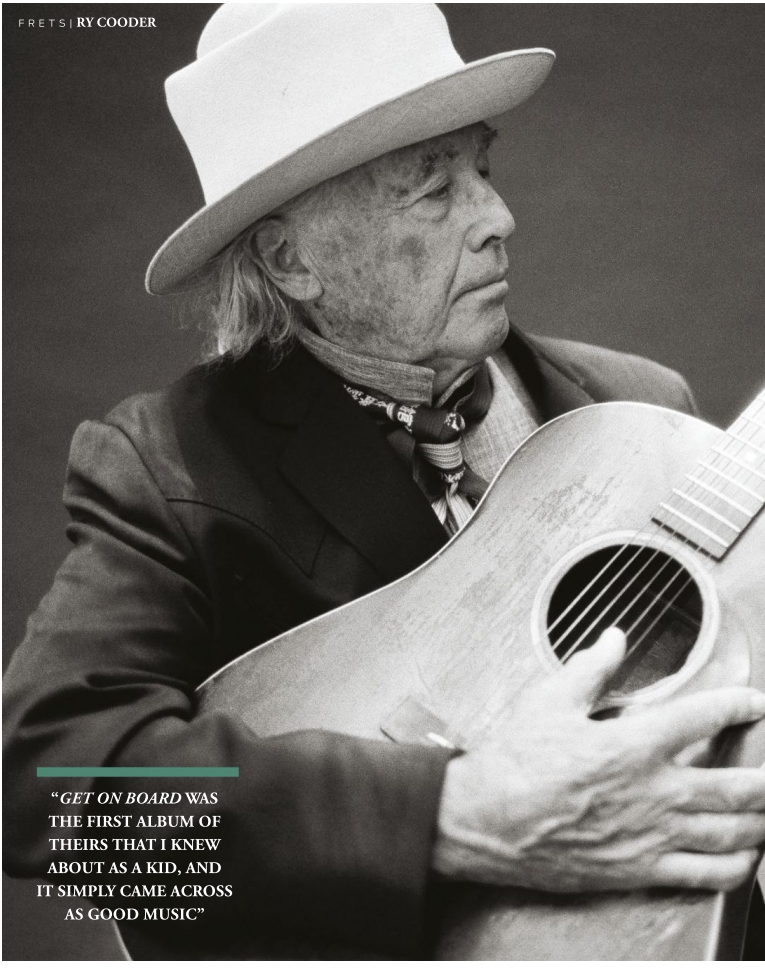

"*GET ON BOARD* WAS THE FIRST ALBUM OF THEIRS THAT I KNEW ABOUT AS A KID, AND IT SIMPLY CAME ACROSS AS GOOD MUSIC"

BACK ON BOARD

Ry Cooder reunites with **Taj Mahal** for an album that returns to both men's roots: *Get On Board: The Songs of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee*.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ABBY ROSS

RY COODER AND Taj Mahal started out together with the short-lived Rising Sons before parting ways and going on to become two of the most important individual figures in American music. Now they've come full circle to pay tribute to two of their original heroes with the album *Get On Board: The Songs of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee* (Nonsuch).

To be honest, we had a sense that a project between these heavyweights was in the offing. Last year, as Mahal turned 80, he graced our pages with a historic two-part interview [*August and September 2021*]. While he told us at the time that he was in contact with Cooder, it seemed futile to speculate on what that

might mean while the pandemic was in full swing.

This time, we spoke with Cooder on the date of his 75th trip around the sun — March 15 — and he enlightened us about the project and the fascinating instruments he brought to the almost entirely acoustic affair. Once again, it will take two parts to deliver all the goods that he gave to us.

For the uninitiated, suffice it to say that *GP* long ago enshrined Cooder in the Gallery of Greats for his astounding array of solo albums, soundtrack work (including 1986's *Crossroads*), sideman credits with everyone from the Rolling Stones to Little Feat, and of course, his expedition to Cuba that yielded the musical and cultural renaissance that was the Buena Vista Social Club. If they ever create a Mount Rushmore of influential guitarists on Americana Mountain, it would surely be graced with Cooder's face. *Get On Board: The Songs of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee* finds him continuing his musical journey in a way that will appeal to fans of an authentic down-home aesthetic. The album has a back-porch feel, with a live parlor room sound. Cooder wields an array of vintage acoustics plus mandolin, banjo and a cameo by his most infamous electric. Mahal mostly sings and plays harp.

Their reunion is a long time coming. After forming Rising Sons in 1965 (the name referenced Terry & McGhee's song "Rising Sun" from the 1952 Folkways album *Get On Board*), Cooder and Mahal were signed to Columbia, recorded an album that was shelved, and quickly disbanded. The record was officially released as *Rising Sons* in 1992. While they haven't teamed up for another collaborative studio effort until now, Cooder contributed guitar to Mahal's 1968 eponymous solo debut.

On *Get On Board: The Songs of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee*, they do great justice shedding considerable light on one of the most influential and enduring duos in the history of the blues. The collaboration of harmonica player and vocalist Terry with guitarist McGhee lasted more than three decades, from the early '40s to the mid '70s, when they cut

With Taj Mahal

gems such as "Midnight Special," "Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee" and "I Shall Not Be Moved." Accompanied by his son Joachim Cooder on drums and bass, Cooder and Mahal revitalize the material with purposeful vigor as they approach the twilight of their careers.

Of the million things you two might endeavor together after more than a half a century apart, how did you settle on a tribute to Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee?

Well, mostly because I knew we could pull it off. It's way of having a context and a repertoire that's coherent. After all the songs they did throughout so many years on so many albums, there was something special about *Get On Board*. It was the first album of theirs that I knew about as a kid, and it simply came across as good music. Of course, Brownie was shooting for a white audience at that point. They weren't going to be playing what Black folks were listening to as popular music anymore. It was pre-war after all, that whole Piedmont style.

Piedmont blues is commonly described as having an alternating thumb with a melody line over the top, but that's true for many fingerpicking styles. What's your take on Piedmont specifically?

Well, you have something there. What people are referring to has something to do with the archeology. I guess Black folks came up from the Caribbean and settled in that area [*Piedmont stretches from New Jersey in the north to central Alabama in the south*]. They had a certain rhythm, swing and phrasing that's antique now, I mean it's ancient.

What about the guitar playing on *Get On Board* resonated with your young soul?

I was about 11 or 12 when I first heard *Get On Board*. I had no idea who Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee were. You don't know very much when you're from Santa Monica at that age, but I knew that 10-inch Folkways LPs were always interesting, and you were going to learn something. There was no folk music to be found anywhere else in Los Angeles except for this one particular record store. Two sisters ran it, and they'd let you play a record to see if you liked it. I'd take the bus to this store and poke around. I played *Get On Board* and said, "Oh wow, this is fantastic." It's fun, the guitar is great and the harmonica is incredible. What they were doing was very stimulating. You know, Brownie stepped into Fuller's shoes when Fuller died. [*Blind Boy Fuller was Brownie McGhee's mentor. He set the guitar-and-harp mold with Sonny Terry that McGhee stepped into and furthered.*]

> **"AS SOON AS I PUT THE FINGER PICKS ON, THE INSTRUMENT SEEMED TO AGREE: 'AH, NOW WE'RE READY FOR BUSINESS HERE'"**

Can you describe some technical stuff about what Fuller handed down to McGhee and in turn, your own playing?

I don't know any technical stuff, but

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even at that age I had been playing guitar somewhat, and I knew what I was hearing. The thumb and the fingers are doing separate jobs. The thumb is the rhythmic downbeat, so the thumb goes down, and then the fingers come up, mostly the first finger and sometimes the second finger. It's somewhat intricate and requires good coordination to learn, of course. I'm not saying that I could do it like Brownie when I was 12 years old by any means, but I understood his system.

In the videos you're clearly using a thumb pick, which he did as well, correct?

Yes. It was just the two of them, so Brownie's guitar had big job to do. It's the rhythm, and the rhythm has got to be heard. Players needed finger picks to get enough volume for the acoustic guitar to be a strong rhythm instrument. Some played National guitars with steel bodies. What I knew Brownie to play was a D-18 Martin. Prior to that he played a J-45 Gibson, probably one of those banner guitars [*referring to World War II era flattops with the slogan "Only a Gibson is Good Enough" in a golden banner on the headstock*]. That's not nearly loud enough if you're on a microphone in a joint, a little club with a poor sound system. But Brownie was a strong man with strong hands, and he really bore down on that D-18. Let me tell you, he played it for dear life.

So you had to have strength, but you had to have finger picks. I don't like finger picks at all, but if you're going to play that way as I did on this record — use 'em. You need the thumb pick, but for room recording finger picks can be optional. I tried finger picks for some of the tunes to see if I could get the right thing going, but for others I didn't like using them because it's clumsy. I can't keep them on. They fell off my fingers a couple times. But Brownie never had any trouble. He was a good player, and both the thumb pick and the finger picks seemed essential.

Cooder onstage with the Cooder-White-Skaggs band, 2015

What type?

Well, back then we had National picks, but you can't get them anymore. The ones I have now are Mike Seeger's that came with a banjo of his that I bought after he died. The picks they make now are terrible. The metal is wrong. But those old National picks are good because they're softer and make a prettier sound. If you're going to do Brownie, then sometimes you've got to use them. The difference is that now we record with earphones, so we don't need to play so hard. Turn up the earphones, you don't have to force it as much, and your rhythm is better. I'm sure they didn't use earphones when they recorded. Of course, why would they?

How did you capture such a great live room sound?

Taj and I each had a couple of microphones placed close together in front of us with my son Joachim playing drums in his living room. It's a small space, but for this it was the perfect size. The ceiling height works well because you don't get reflection off of it. The room wasn't designed as a studio, obviously, but it's excellent for acoustic instruments.

What's going on in "Packing Up and Getting Ready to Go," which sounds particularly roomy with a wild string tone?

With the Rising Sons lineup in 1966. (from left) Gary Marker, Kevin Kelley, Jesse Lee Kincaid, Mahal and Cooder

That's a crazy enormous gut-string banjo. Before Taj even arrived when we were setting up I started playing the thing through the mics and earphones to see if it was going to be useful. Then Joachim came, sat down and started playing his drums. It was a cool groove, something different, so we edited it down and used it for that song.

You mentioned McGhee playing a D-18 and you appear to be playing a vintage Martin D-18 on some songs in the videos as well, including "I Shall Not Be Moved." What makes mahogany the right wood for this sound?

Mahogany gives the D-18 a nice bright, snappy sound. So it helps you do that, it helps you be snappy. The D-28 [*rosewood with a spruce top*] is mellower or bigger, but not as snappy and therefore not as useful for this kind of music. I've got one and I tried it, but it didn't come across as well on the mic. The D-18 that you see is a 1946, so it's still a good year. The sound is very dry, and it's been played to death, so it's nice and responsive. The neck is a little clumsy like some of them were in the wartime, but it's a really good guitar for playing blues with picks. If you don't like fingerpicks, then you'd want a flatpick. But as soon as I put the picks on, the instrument seemed to agree: "Ah, now we're ready for business here." ■

We'll return next month with the second half of this interview featuring oodles more Cooder talking about his other steel-strings, as well as his mandolin, the Cooder-caster, slide insights and his lifelong struggle to amplify acoustics.

JACK VARTOOGIAN/GETTY IMAGES (2015); MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (1966)

"Ten years ago you guys made good looking guitars that were a little like Tony Z's. Interesting guitars that sounded okay. Nowadays you make great looking sound amazing. Everyday I find new sounds: I want another Electric Gypsy as well as a Gypsy Queen to replace my Rock 'n Roll Classics..."
(Lance Keltner, March 2022)

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SMOOTH & SOULFUL

An in-depth look at the subtle artistic and technical elements behind Bonnie Raitt's celebrated and highly emotive slide playing.

BY JEFF JACOBSON

LOOKING BACK ON the years I spent developing as a guitarist, I often kick myself for having taken certain musicians for granted — guitarists who always sounded so good but whose style I dismissed as "easy" to play. While I was focused on learning solos crowded with notes, another musical world was passing me by. This is not to say that playing a lot of notes isn't musical; it all depends on when and how you do it. But that's a lesson for another day.

I save one of my hardest kicks for when I think of Bonnie Raitt. From listening to Raitt and players like her, I learned that being a good guitarist requires playing with an emphasis on musicality and tasteful note choices, along with a dedication to making a solo serve the song. This requires a different kind of technique, one that is more subtle and surely not easy. I'm going to try to make up for all that lost time by exploring Raitt's unique approach to music, and more specifically, the guitar.

It's almost as if Raitt has two voices. When listening to her songs, her smooth and soulful vocal style is immediately apparent. But when she lays down some of her signature open-tuned slide guitar licks, it becomes clear that she is a musician of great depth.

Before we dive into her guitar work, let's talk about Raitt's tone. She doesn't require anything elaborate or wildly expensive to achieve her warm, sustaining sound. Her main guitar, Brownie, is a Fender Strat that pairs an unpainted 1965 body with a neck from an unknown year. It has long been her faithful onstage companion, and she hasn't played a show without it since the late night in 1969 when she bought it for a whopping $120. The price was right, and she loved how it sounded. Raitt strings the guitar with a custom set of GHS Boomers, in gauges .013, .017, .020w, .032, .042 and .052.

For amplification, Bonnie plugs her Strat into a Bad Cat Black Cat 30R 1x12 combo, while ultimately achieving her warm, overdriven tone with the simple addition of a Pro Co Rat distortion pedal. She recently replaced her Boss CS-2 compressor with yet another classic, the MXR Dyna Comp, which provides all the sustain she needs to conjure the long-lasting notes that are a hallmark of her style. Add in her Dunlop bottleneck slide and custom Dunlop molded-plastic

SCOTT DUDELSON/REDMAGIC/GETTY IMAGES

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fingerpicks, and that's it! So let's turn our focus to how she plays, as this is what contributes most to her unique blend of rock, R&B, blues, and soul.

Chicago blues giant Muddy Waters was a major influence on Raitt, with his electrifying guitar style and ability to sustain a long career, something she was determined to achieve for herself. Other influences include a host of blues artists such as Howlin' Wolf, Mississippi Fred McDowell and Furry Lewis, all of whom, like Waters, played fingerstyle guitar and incorporated slide work.

But Raitt was also drawn to the early rock and roll of Elvis Presley and Fats Domino, as well as the 1960s folk movement led by the likes of Pete Seeger and Peter, Paul & Mary. Their emphasis on activism resonated with Bonnie, and she would soon begin an earnest dedication to environmental and human rights causes that she continues today.

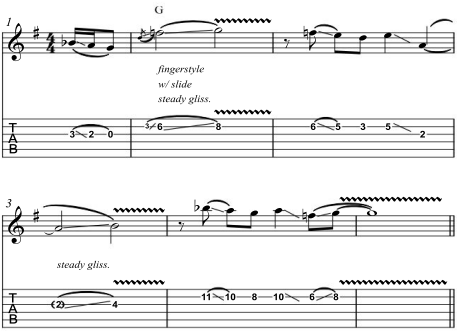
An important element of Raitt's playing is her use of open tunings and capos. She most often plays in open A tuning (low to high: E, A, E, A, C♯, E), but she also uses open G, which is the same tuning scheme transposed down one whole step (low to high: D, G, D, G, B, D). (All slide guitar examples in this lesson are presented in open G.)

Raitt often employs open strings in her rhythm and slide playing, and will often use a capo based on a song's key, most often at the 3rd or 5th frets. For example, if her guitar is tuned to open A and the song is in the key of C major, she will often place her capo at the 3rd fret. This will cause the open strings to produce a C chord — the tonic or "home" chord — giving her the opportunity to incorporate any "open" string she likes.

When it comes to playing slide guitar, Raitt isn't in a hurry. For example, when playing a melodic theme or guitar solo, she'll often include a long, slow slide to create a mix of anticipation and plaintive longing. **Ex. 1** illustrates this approach with a phrase in the style of "Unintended Consequence of Love," from 2012's *Dig in Deep*. (For ease of reading, all music examples that require a capo are written in the key of G major,

Ex. 1

Open G tuning, capo 3rd fret. All tablature positions are relative to the capo. All music sounds in the key of B♭, a minor 3rd higher than written.



Ex. 2

Open G tuning, capo 3rd fret. All tablature positions are relative to the capo. All music sounds in the key of B♭, a minor 3rd higher than written.

Ex. 3

Open G tuning

instead of the actual sounding key. The capo-ed fret is "0" in the tab.)

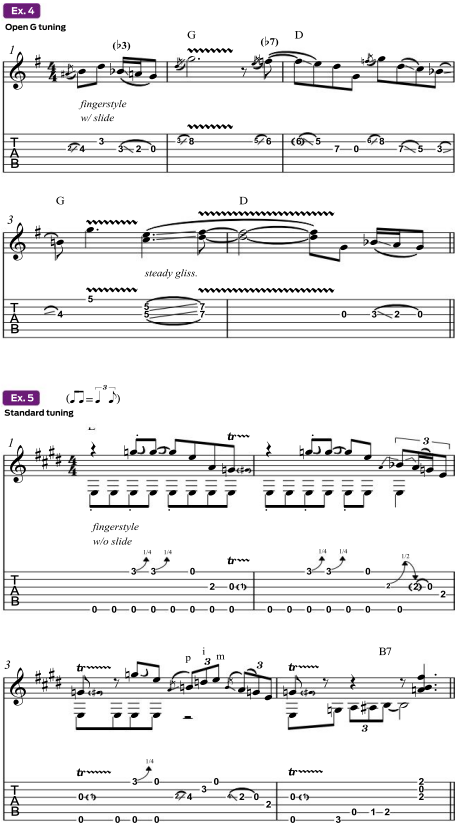
Another signature slide move of Bonnie's is to slowly slide a note down the neck. **Ex. 2** is reminiscent of a phrase she plays in "Thing Called Love," from her breakthrough 1989 album, *Nick of Time*. Notice how the first note is left to simply hang in the air. Like other great guitarists, she has a sublime vibrato, but she knows when *not* to use it.

Raitt also employs another subtle approach when sliding into a note from above, as she sometimes uses a quick slide starting from a whole step, or two frets, higher. Inspired by "Love Letter," also from *Nick of Time*, **Ex. 3** demonstrates how this snarky little slide move can inject some attitude into your playing.

While playing a song in a major key, Raitt will frequently (and slyly) borrow notes from its parallel minor pentatonic scale, which is built from the same root. For example, if a song is in the key of G major, she'll often be inclined to use notes from G minor pentatonic, which is spelled G (the root), B♭ (the minor, or "flatted," 3rd), C (the perfect 4th), D (the perfect 5th) and F (the minor, or "flatted," 7th). The "blue" notes here — the ♭3 and ♭7 — are her targets, as the three remaining notes are duplicated in the G major scale (G, A, B, C, D, E, F♯).

Ex. 4 is reminiscent of Raitt's playing in "Something to Talk About," from her 1991 Grammy-winning album, *Luck of the Draw*. We're again in the key of G major here, and, if you look at the music notation, you'll see how B♭ (the ♭3) and F (the ♭7) are borrowed from the G minor pentatonic scale. But notice how they're prevented from coming across too harshly by quickly moving on to diatonic notes from the G major scale right next door (A and E, respectively). This creates a sound that is as soulful as it is bluesy. Raitt will take advantage of this approach often, and in such a way as to make it always sound fresh.

Let's take a quick detour to discuss Raitt's rhythm guitar style, when she'll often give her slide a rest. If you're unfamiliar with her earlier albums, you might be surprised to hear her playing in a more traditional blues style. **Ex. 5**



brings to mind "Love Me Like a Man" from her 1972 album, *Give It Up*. Played without a slide, and in standard tuning, it offers up a classic fingerstyle blues, played with a triplet, or "shuffle," feel. Be sure to use your pick-hand thumb on the third beat of bar 3, as indicated.

Raitt is especially masterful when interpreting ballads. A great example is her cover of John Prine's "Angel from Montgomery" from 1974's *Streetlights*. In it, she uses both strumming and fingerpicking in the vein of **Ex. 6**. The guitarist strums with with the tips of her plastic fingerpicks, but if you don't own a set, you can use the tips of your fingers in much the same way. Note the use of drop-D tuning here, where the low E string is tuned down one whole step, to D, and a capo at the 2nd fret.

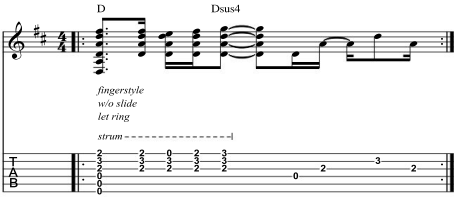
Raitt will often alternate between overtly stating a song's groove and sneakily playing her rhythm parts tucked into the band. **Ex. 7** is reminiscent of "Ain't Gonna Let You Go" from her 2012 Grammy-winning album, *Slipstream*, where she lays down a funky blues groove, without using her slide. In these situations Raitt will often wear it — on her middle finger, as always — to give her the option to use it if she wants to.

Bonnie most often chooses to perform music by other songwriters and will commonly invest three to four years into sorting through songs in order to find an album's worth of material to record. However, she does perform her own songs as well. "Give It Up or Let Me Go," a song she wrote for her album *Give It Up*, features her plucking fretted notes, then switching to slide partway through, making its entrance a welcome surprise. **Ex. 8** is inspired by her unaccompanied intro on this track.

Raitt loves to let notes ring a tad longer than you think she might. To accomplish this, she gently coaxes them along with a wide vibrato. To give this a try, see **Ex. 9**, which is based on "Love Sneakin' Up On You" from 1994's *Longing in Their Hearts*. Summon a wide vibrato by quickly wiggling, or "wagging," your slide back and forth, covering the area between the adjacent frets on either side. This technique,

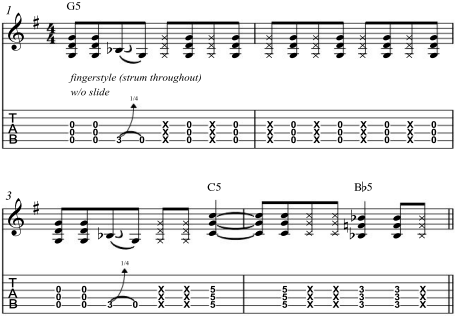
Ex. 6

Drop-D tuning, capo 2nd fret. All tablature positions are relative to the capo.
All music sounds in the key of E, one whole step higher than written.



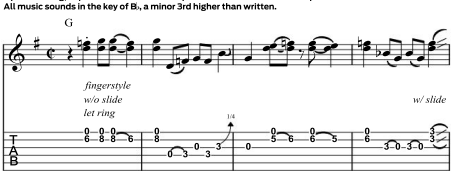
Ex. 7 (♫♫ = ♩ ♪)

Open G tuning, capo 5th fret. All tablature positions are relative to the capo.
All music sounds in the key of C, a perfect 4th higher than written.



Ex. 8 (♫♫ = ♩ ♪)

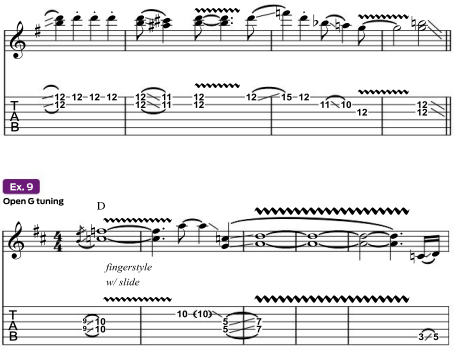
Open G tuning, capo 3rd fret. All tablature positions are relative to the capo.
All music sounds in the key of B♭, a minor 3rd higher than written.



combined with the use of a compressor pedal, gives the guitarist the sustain she needs to wring everything out of each note, a hallmark of her style.

Bonnie Raitt's phrasing and touch are what place her among a select group of soulful and expressive guitarists who make you sit up and listen even though it can be confounding to figure out just what makes them sound so good. There's a lot going on "behind the scenes" of Raitt's seemingly effortless approach to music that has enabled her to achieve the Muddy Waters–like longevity she envisioned for herself over 50 years ago. To her credit, she has consistently done it in her own self-effacing, understated way — all the while making it look "easy."

Have a question about this lesson? Feel free to reach out to Jeff on Twitter @jjmusicmentor or at jeffjacobson.net.



MORE ONLINE!

For video of this lesson, go to guitarplayer.com/june22-learn

Writing and Recording Acoustic Rock, Pt. 1

Spirit Hustler, "The Spirit of '69"

BY JIMMY LESLIE

FOR ROCK AND technology, 1969 was a most transformative year. A stellar synergetic example is how the BBC included rising star David Bowie's "Space Oddity" in its coverage of NASA's *Apollo 11* spaceflight to the moon. We're still feeling the ripple effect trickling down to the present. An iPhone packs more tech than it took to get to the Moon, and an app offers many more tracks than Bowie had a his disposal.

I spent much of the past few years exploring digital audio and video possibilities, and have finally rendered the kind of modern/classic rock album I've dreamed of making since birth, in 1969. I'm thrilled to share lessons learned about creating Spirit Hustler's self-titled debut album, starting with the cosmic lead track, "The Spirit of '69." Unbelievably, the first MP3 copy blasted into space with Dr. Chris Boshuizen sitting right alongside William Shatner. Like each of the diverse 10 tunes, it has an acoustic origin story.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Each instrument offers a unique creative opportunity and can have huge sway on how you play. Case in point, I wasn't deeply tuned into the triple-0/OM body style until 2019, when Martin introduced the Modern Deluxe series and sent an MD OM-28 for review. It's a natural fingerpicker, and the fact that it has no cutaway, a shallow depth and a spacious fingerboard influenced my approach, especially higher up on the neck.

One day, I went to form a standard A chord at the ninth position with a pinkie on the root at the 12th fret of the fifth string, but the stretch was a bit much, so I used a simplified version with an open A root and left the high E string open as well. The next move was a revelation. The somewhat asymmetrical neck somehow invited me to form a slightly unusual A minor: Leave the index finger on the E at the ninth fret of the third string, and then find the minor 3rd (C) at the 10th fret of the fourth string with the middle finger. The ring finger then replaces the middle finger at the A on the 10th fret of the second string.

Frets Editor Jimmy Leslie at the Martin Musuem with a commemorative HD-28 honoring the 50th anniversary of the Moon landing.

Enthralled by the ability to toggle between A major and minor, I soon developed a fingerpicking pattern. The next realization was that I could slide the whole shebang down a step using the index finger to lead the charge. The ringing open strings sounded even cooler surrounding G major and minor, and then again when I tried sliding the whole thing down another step, to F. Sliding down another step didn't work, so I found some weird diminished-sounding formation in the fifth position and landed on a low open E. Then came a similar major-to-minor motif in E using a comparable chord fingerpicking strategy, again starting at the ninth position and using different formations to descend over a sixth-string root.

I followed up with an ascending progression starting on a standard E chord. It's a continuous climb of various shapes using only the second-through-fourth strings, leaving the first string open while copping a bass climb on the sixth string with a wrapped thumb. I realized I could "shoot the moon" all the way back up to an E power chord in the eighth position. It sounded classic yet modern, somewhat akin to "Hotel California." And like the song says, "We haven't had that spirit here since 1969."

LIFT-OFF AT THE MARTIN MUSEUM

The 50th anniversary of the lunar landing was happening, and my generation was turning 50 as well. We'd lived half an analog life and were the first to come of age in the digital age. That set the stage for the song's lyrics. When I took a tour of the Martin Museum in the fall, I couldn't believe my eyes. There was the original 1930 OM-45 that set the mold for the neck on the MD OM-28 I'd been playing, as well as a custom HD-28 commemorating the 50th anniversary of landing on the moon! They were setting up a video shoot and graciously allowed me to play both quickly for a soundcheck. That rendered the first recording of "The Spirit of '69." Watch it as well as the official video with studio audio when this appears online at guitarplayer.com/june22-learn. We created them at Lucky Recording Company using Apple Logic Pro and Apple Final Cut Pro. ■

Jimmy Leslie has been Frets Editor since 2016. See many Guitar Player*– and Frets-related videos on his YouTube channel, and learn all about his psychedelic folk rock group at spirithustler.com.*

GIBSON

Generation Collection

TESTED BY JIMMY LESLIE

GIBSON'S NEW GENERATION

Collection is designed for players of all sizes, skill levels and bank accounts that are in the market for a genuine American acoustic built with solid woods in the venerable manufacturer's Bozeman, Montana factory. These four no-frills instruments all share one distinctly outside-the-box feature: the Player Port on the top side above the upper bout. All feature walnut back and sides, a Sitka spruce top, and a striped ebony fretboard as well as Grover tuners, a Tusq nut and saddle, and a slim utile neck. There are two models with electronics (EC) and two without, ranging in size from parlor to jumbo. All are on review here, and all have slightly thinned bodies for comfort. From smallest to largest, they include the G-00 parlor, G-45 round-shouldered dreadnought, G-Writer EC square-shouldered cutaway dreadnought and G-200 EC cutaway jumbo.

The Generation Collection has modest aesthetics. The woods appear unrefined and barely finished in an open-pore matte satin style that appears so natural, the guitar could perhaps have come straight off a workbench. Appointments are minimal, particularly on the diminutive G-00 and compact G-45. The G-Writer EC and the G-200 EC feature black bindings and hip "single-bar" fretboard inlays. It would also be nice if the headstock logo were inlayed rather than silkscreened.

THE PLAYER PORT

According to Gibson, the Player Port is a concept the company flirted with back in the early '60s that has been "refined to deliver a fresh dimension to the time-honored Gibson acoustic sound." Top vibrations are the main sound source on an acoustic guitar. The sound hole facilitates air exchange, but the loudest part of an acoustic is the sound board between the bridge and the endpin. The sides serve more of a structural purpose, and it makes sense that an extra port there would allow additional sound exchange.

To my ears, the Player Port adds expansiveness. You can surely hear top vibrations coming through it, and there is an overall volume bump as well, from the player's perspective. I didn't sense any loss of volume when listening from an audience perspective, but there is a sonic shift. Simply covering the port with my hand produced a chunky, closed speaker cabinet tone, while leaving it uncovered added air to the midrange, similar to an open-back cabinet.

For anyone concerned about the port's effect on structural stability, it's placed precisely where preamp controls have gone in acoustic guitars for many years. The Player Port is fun, pure and simple. It would be even more fun to include a cap that the player could put in or take out to change the tone.

SPECIFICATIONS

Features in Common

CONTACT gibson.com

NUT Tusq, 1.73" wide
NECK Utile (also known as sipo mahogany)
FRETBOARD Striped ebony, 24 3/4" scale
TUNERS Mini Grover Rotomatic, nickel plated
BRIDGE Striped ebony
FACTORY STRINGS Gibson Coated Phosphor Bronze .012–.053
BUILT USA

KUDOS Quality American-made craftsmanship with solid woods. Loud, vibrant tones. Player Port adds dimension. Excellent playability
CONCERNS Silkscreened headstock logo. Would be cool to include a Port cap

ADDITIONAL NOTES G-Writer EC & G-200 EC Well-suited to a variety of applications, from home to the stage. Amplified volume of first string comparatively soft

SPECIFICATIONS

G-00
PRICE $999 street
BODY Parlor, L-00 style. Solid walnut back and sides, solid Sitka spruce top
ELECTRONICS None
WEIGHT 4.2 lbs (as tested)

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

SPECIFICATIONS

G-45
PRICE $1,599 street
BODY Dreadnought, round shoulders. Solid walnut back and sides, solid Sitka spruce top
ELECTRONICS None
WEIGHT 4.2 lbs (as tested)

SPECIFICATIONS

G-Writer EC
PRICE $1,599 street
BODY Songwriter, dreadnought cutaway. Solid walnut back and sides, solid Sitka spruce top
ELECTRONICS L.R.Baggs Element Bronze
WEIGHT 4.5 lbs (as tested)

SPECIFICATIONS

G-200 EC
PRICE $1,999 street
BODY Jumbo (J-200) cutaway. Solid walnut back and sides, solid Sitka spruce top
ELECTRONICS L.R.Baggs Element Bronze
WEIGHT 4.5 lbs (as tested)

In addition to the extra sonics, it's fun to be able to look inside the guitar to see the bracings and such. Gibson Generation artist Amythyst Kiah notes, "The Player Port also makes it easier to retrieve your pick if you drop it inside."

SOUNDS

All four Generation acoustics have rather raw, lively tones that fit, given their sizes and styles. They are generally well balanced with focus in the middle range. To make a wine-based comparison, the flavor is fundamental-forward, with a rather dry finish. There's a hearty, earthy quality. The base tone is not thin or airy, although the Player Port expands the sound of each in its own way. Of course the parlor has the smallest and thinnest tone of the bunch, but it's louder and more open than expected. The round-shouldered dreadnought G-45 sounds similar but significantly bigger. It's worth mentioning that this G-45 replaces the original Generation G-45 Standard and Studio models introduced in 2019.

Interestingly, the square-shouldered dreadnought cutaway G-Writer has a tighter sound all around, with powerful projection that the Player Port seems to bolster. I could sense the booming low sound waves impacting the bones in my ears, as well as other body parts, depending on how I held it. It made me want to chunk away percussively with muted strings like John Fogerty at the start of "Lookin' Out My Back Door." The Writer takes to lowered tunings like a duck to water. When I sat down and played in a low C tuning, I swear I could feel resonations passing through my legs and into the wooden floor. The bigness of the jumbo seemed less about booming bass and more about its generous jangle. Like the classic J-200, the G-200 is born to strum and has fine chime, and the Player Port makes the sound widespread and almost symphonic.

Gibson clearly figured the G-00 and G-45 more for front-porch picking and back-road traveling than for the stage, since they are strictly acoustic. The G-Writer EC and G-200 EC were obviously designed with the performer in mind, as both have Baggs Element Bronze electronics and cutaways for upper-register access, hence the "EC" designation for *electronics* and *cutaway*. The only knob is a volume control located discretely on the upper lip of the sound hole. It's weird not to have a tone control, but the sound seems to grow bolder naturally as the volume increases. It gets pretty darn big and boomy when pegged. Both EC guitars suffer from a lack of volume on the first string. That's a very common issue with piezo bridge saddle pickups, and it's always a good idea to do a quick string-to-string check for consistency.

G-Writer EC

G-45

G-00 G-200

PERFORMANCE

In terms of playability, Generation Acoustics are down the middle between modern and classic. The "advanced response" neck profile is basically a C shape — on the slim side, but not too slim. The action is relatively easy, and the feel is fantastic. According to Gibson, these necks have a flatter radius of 16 inches, which is on the traditional side. Interestingly, the neck specs are exactly the same for all four instruments, as are string gauges, so differences in playability are mostly due to the shorter scale length of the G-00 and G-45, which brings the frets a bit closer together, and the longer scale length of the G-Writer and G-200, which gives the strings a snappier feel. The G-00's "personal parlor" size makes it the easiest to manage. Interestingly, the jumbo felt second easiest to play in my hands, jumping positions up and down via a variety of attacks. The dreadnoughts, of course, beg to be played with a pick, and cowboy chords and bluegrass licks come naturally.

Gibson's Generation Collection delivers solid American craftsmanship at a value and in a range of sizes and styles. Put in baseball terms, it's a fastball down the middle, with one exceptional curve in the form of the Player Port. It's interesting that Gibson put that curve on this otherwise straightforward pitch. The assumption must be that younger, more adventurous players on a budget would dig such an unconventional element on a guitar that's otherwise designed to deliver fundamentally classic tones with modern playability. The Player Port certainly adds dimension and a deeper sense of immersion for the player, and delivers a welcome element of fun to the whole shebang. The diverse artists chosen to represent the Generation Collection demonstrate Gibson's desire to broaden its audience. Kudos for that and for putting American-made instruments within reach of the masses. The sonorous G-Writer is particularly well suited for a variety of applications, from bedroom to the studio and the stage, and it earns our Editors' Pick Award.

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RIVOLTA

Regata VII

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

MARRYING A NUMBER of popular styles, the new Rivolta Regata VII will present some familiar visual reference points for many players, not least of which is clear evidence of the design prowess of Dennis Fano, formerly of his own eponymous brand and currently head of the popular Novo Guitars. Representing a more affordable offshore offshoot for Fano, Rivolta guitars are manufactured at the highly regarded Mirr Music Co. factory in South Korea, which also makes guitars for Reverend, Danelectro, Baum and other respected brands with western design roots.

SPECIFICATIONS

Regata VII
CONTACT rivoltaguitars.com
PRICE $1,499 street, with premium gigbag

NUT Bone, 1 11/16" wide
NECK Mahogany, 25" scale length, slim-leaning rounded "C+" profile
FRETBOARD Ebony, 12" radius
FRETS 24 medium-jumbo
TUNERS Wilkinson Deluxe Brand (Kluson style)
BODY Laminated maple top and back with mahogany sides and solid mahogany center block
BRIDGE Nashville-style Tune-o-matic bridge and stopbar tailpiece
PICKUP Two Rivolta Brevetto humbuckers
CONTROLS Volume, tone, three-way switch
FACTORY STRINGS D'Addario OEM .010–.046 (non-colored ball ends)
WEIGHT 7.8 lbs (as tested)
BUILT Korea

KUDOS Hip styling, good build quality and easy playability from a well-priced alternative to the ES-335-inspired norm
CONCERNS A little pinging from hitching in the plain-string nut slots, but that's easily remedied

Those who know Fano and Novo guitars will recognize a kinship between the offset-waist, semi-acoustic body of the Regata VII and, for example, the shape of Novo's solidbody Serus J, whose sharp, asymmetrical cutaway horns are faintly echoed here, with some variations in the lines. We've seen the nifty two-tiered headstock on much of Fano's work in the past, too, along with the fretboard's '50s-era Gretsch-like full-width blocks. Whether or not you find these elements appealing — and I do — they speak to the advanced aesthetic sensibilities of a guitar maker firing on all cylinders. The Regata VII's own retro touchstones are also found in the Fender Starcaster of the late '70s, which applied a more rounded-horned, offset-waist design to the CBS-era maker's attempt to knock the ES-335 off the semi-acoustic podium.

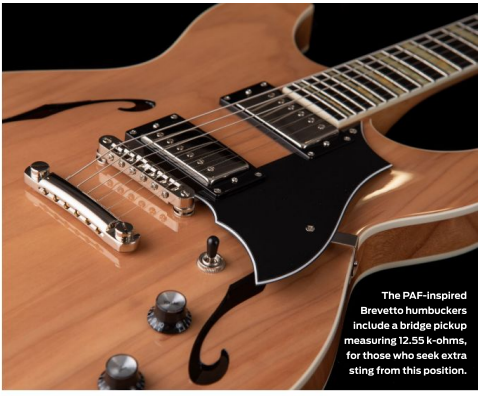
Like the Gibson semis that will inevitably be mentioned in its proximity, the Regata VII has a solid block running from tailpin to neck joint to bolster its thinline rigidity, but in this case it's mahogany rather than the traditional maple. The gently arched top and back are

indeed made of laminated maple, but the guitar's sides — which also constitute a more rigid overall frame than the usual bent laminated-maple strips — are carved from mahogany, as is the glued-in neck. A bound ebony fingerboard tops the timber selection. Our test guitar is dressed in a vintage-natural finish that Rivolta calls Acero Glow (a play on Rickenbacker's natural Maple Glo finish, using the genus name for this wood), which makes for an appealingly dressed package.

The hardware includes a nickel-plated Nashville style Tune-o-matic bridge and wraparound tailpiece, and six-in-line Kluson Deluxe tuners. The Regata VII strays from the norm just a little with a 25-inch scale length, which helps to squeeze in 24 jumbo frets, all very nicely dressed and polished on this example. The nut width of 1 11/16 inches and the 12-inch fingerboard radius hit right at the G-style norm, however, and the entire playing feel still best equates to a mid '60s ES thinline model. The neck shape is what Rivolta calls its "C+" profile, an early '60s carve that's given just a little more girth to avoid the flat-backed feel that those can sometimes have, and it certainly sits well in the hand.

The pickups on this model are a pair of Rivolta's own Brevetto humbuckers, made with Alnico V magnets and traditional 42-AWG coil wire. They measure 7.66 k-ohms in the neck position and 12.55 k-ohms in the bridge. Rivolta calls them "PAF inspired," though the bridge pickup is far more heavily wound than any such unit from the late '50s or early '60s. That said, many makers — and players — in the Regata's target market are looking for extra sting from the bridge position, and this humbucker should deliver. They're wired through a three-way selector and master volume and tone controls.

All in all, the Regata VII's build quality is impressive, and the fit, finish and setup present a sturdy and reliable instrument right out of the Rivolta gigbag. I got a little pinging at the nut slots for the plain strings when twisting the tuners or, occasionally, bending hard, but that should be easily remedied with some lubricant or a slight pass or two of the slot file. Otherwise, the guitar played easily and smoothly all up the neck and exhibited a loud, lively sound unplugged, with a lot of woody resonance overall and a piano-like girth in the wound strings.

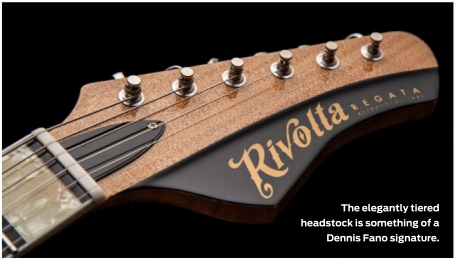


The PAF-inspired Brevetto humbuckers include a bridge pickup measuring 12.55 k-ohms, for those who seek extra sting from this position.

Tested through a Friedman Small Box head and 1x12 cab, a Fender Deluxe Reverb and a selection of pedals, the Rivolta Regata VII proved to be an appealing and versatile performer, but one that is certainly predisposed toward the rocky side of indie, alternative and roots styles. The neck pickup sounds particularly sweet, with a tasty bit of compression at the front of the pick attack and good body and clarity, atop the underpinning of warmth you would expect from this position. The bridge pickup is definitely predisposed to crunch and wail, and it pushes an edge-of-break-up amp into some bluesy or classic-rock grind. I found that it really excels in a high-gain setting, where it enables bags of saturation as well as singing lead work.

The tone cleans up by rolling back the guitar's volume control, but that also darkens the tone, so the best road to acceptable jangle and chime comes via the middle position, which delivers very usable sparkly and slightly scooped sounds that work great for lighter chords and arpeggios. The Regata VII is quite feedback resistant for a semi-acoustic, but you can intentionally induce a little at higher volumes or with an overdrive pedal engaged, to aid your sustain or atmospherics as desired.

All told, between the hip "familiar-alternative" styling and the confident, versatile performance, the Rivolta Regata VII is definitely one to consider for players seeking a twist on the ES-335 theme, and a fun ride by any measure.



The elegantly tiered headstock is something of a Dennis Fano signature.

PRS

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

S2 Custom 24-08

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

EVOLUTION IS THE name of the game at PRS, so it's not surprising that the new-for-'22 S2 Custom 24-08 (which is an advancement on the previous S2 Custom 24) carries things forward with a switching system that puts a range of tones intuitively at your fingertips. The model on review here is a beautiful guitar with its Lake Blue finish, an iridescent-blue color that showcases the figuring of the maple like you're seeing it through the waters of a pristine tropical reef. The blue-planet theme is continued on the back, neck and headstock, and cool as this package is, if that's not exactly what you're looking for, you can choose from five other sumptuous shades. Hardware consists of a PRS Patented Gen III Tremolo bridge with a push-in bar, a pair of 85/15 S uncovered humbuckers with a complement of volume and tone controls featuring easy-grip fluted knobs, a three-way selector and a pair of mini-toggle switches for activating the pickups in coil-split mode. The Pattern Thin neck on our review model is set into the body and features a rounded heel that, along with the contoured lower cutaway, makes it easy to grab notes as high up the neck as you want. The rosewood fingerboard has 24 well-finished frets, and the chunky synthetic nut is smooth on the edges and provides straight string-pull to the Low Mass tuners, each of which has a thumbscrew to lock the strings and prevent any slippage. (The thumbscrews aren't "captured," but an extra is included in case you lose one.)

The factory setup was excellent, providing low action with no fret buzz, along with sweet intonation in all positions. The trem is adjusted to float, and pitch up and down maneuvers felt very silky, while tuning remained stable throughout. Perhaps because the bridge doesn't rest on the body, you can hear a little more natural "reverb" coming from the springs, which seems to enhance the acoustic airiness of this guitar and makes it enjoyable to play unplugged.

Tested with a Fender Deluxe Reverb and a Line 6 Catalyst 100 1x12 combo, the S2 Custom 24-08 delivered balanced tones in all settings. The 85/15 S pickups don't present exaggerated midrange or bass frequencies, and they stay very smooth on the top, even when digging in on the bridge setting. Activating the single-coil mode on the rear pickup reduces output a bit and brightens the response, but without causing spikiness or requiring undue attention to the amp EQ. The noise is nil in split-coil mode too, which is another benefit of the 85/15 S design.

Using the mini-toggles to select split-coil on the neck pickup and full humbucker on the bridge yielded tones that cover

SPECIFICATIONS

S2 Custom 24-08
CONTACT prsguitars.com
PRICE $1,929 street, gig bag included

NUT WIDTH 1 11/16"
NECK Mahogany with Pattern Thin profile
FRETBOARD Rosewood, 25"-scale, 10" radius. Birds inlays
FRETS 24 medium jumbo
TUNERS PRS Low Mass locking
BODY Mahogany with beveled, book-matched figured-maple top
BRIDGE PRS Patented Tremolo, Molded
PICKUPS PRS 85/15 S humbuckers
CONTROLS Volume, tone three-way selector. Two mini-toggle coil-tap switches
FACTORY STRINGS PRS Signature .010-.046
WEIGHT 7.4 lbs (as tested)
BUILT USA

KUDOS Excellent playability and tones. Rock-solid build. Quiet single-coil operation
CONCERNS None

everything from crisp, funky cleans to ballsy dirty-rhythm tones when driving an amp that's on the cusp of breakup, and a flick of the switch yields smooth, singing leads as you floor the rear pickup into a high-gain input, in my case the drive channel on the Catalyst.

By itself, the neck pickup's rich sound proves to be spot-on for clean jazz, and it's the bomb for blues, delivering touch-responsive grind in humbucking mode when hitting the Deluxe Reverb with its volume at around five or so, and becoming more aggressive and wailing when played through an OD pedal with the gain set on the low side and the volume cranked to give the amp more overdrive muscle.

Paul Smith changed the game in 1985 by creating the Custom 24, which introduced players to a sleek, offset double-cutaway axe that improved on just about everything, and looked terrific to boot. The S2 Custom 24-08 carries forth the legacy, delivering a similar level of performance, and then some, in a U.S.-made guitar at a price that puts it within reach of those who play for a living. It earns an Editors' Pick Award for doing so.

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HARBINGER

MLS1000 Portable Line Array PA System

TESTED BY ANDY McDONOUGH

WHEN PORTABLE LINE array sound systems first arrived on the scene, their compact size and quick setup made live performing easier. Thanks to their breakthrough speaker designs, players immediately enjoyed better sound quality. The smart integrated design of these systems has made them a staple at small and midsize venues, where space is a valuable commodity. And while pricing initially wasn't far from traditional systems with powered speakers, more channels and effects, more designs have been introduced in recent years, giving players a wider range of options. Among them is the new Harbinger MLS1000 PA. It boasts a larger sub than its predecessor (the MLS900), an impressive list of features, serious power and an attractive price tag. Naturally, I was curious to know if this cost-effective and compact system could compete in the quality department, too.

First, it's important to note that the design of the little Harbinger MLS1000 checks all the right boxes for a compact PA. It offers a built-in mixer that supports up to five sources at once, including Bluetooth audio. It has built-in reverb, chorus and two-knob EQ per input, as well as sound-optimizing DSP selections, transparent limiting for system protection, a 10-inch subwoofer, and a six-speaker vertical array of 2.75-inch neodymium drivers that are articulated for wide, 150-degree dispersion. The entire system breaks down to three pieces that go into a bag and slip cover that can get you into a venue in a single trip. For larger venues, two units can be linked with Harbinger's Smart Stereo capability.

The mixer, easily accessible on the top and back panels of the sub unit, provides five input channels that include two XLR/1/4-inch TRS mic/guitar/line combination inputs, a stereo 1/4-inch TRS input, a stereo 3.5mm TRS and controls for stereo wireless Bluetooth audio. Adjustable reverb is available on channels 1 and 2, while channel 2 also provides acoustic guitar-friendly chorus. The MLS1000 offers two-band EQ on all four channels. The mixer section is very straightforward, with dedicated controls for every function, all logically labeled, of reasonable size and thoughtfully laid out. A DSP switch provides four useful voicings: Standard, Live Band, Dance Music and Speech. Note that only switches and input clipping indicators are lighted, so be prepared in low-light situations.

The MLS1000's physical design and appearance are in line with other line array systems. There's a base unit for the sub that accepts two columnar sections that raise the level of the mid/high speaker array to a height that will effectively cover a small to midsize room. Some notable differences include the sub/mixer's shape and weight. At 30 pounds with its 1.2 mm steel grille, the sub is a little heavier than similar units. But while every pound counts when you're hauling gear around, this unit's weight and cube-like dimensions provide a very solid base for the system. The design offsets the sub's weight with the addition of a centrally located, large handle located perfectly in the center of the sub and rubber-backed for comfort.

Unlike similar systems where array units "drop" in to connect, the MLS1000's array pieces have a front-to-back locking system with thick polypropylene guides that make the connection very secure. The array pieces have a similar and substantial build quality as the base with a steel grille and polypropylene

SPECIFICATIONS

MLS1000 PA
CONTACT harbingerproaudio.com
PRICE $699.99

INPUTS 2x XLR/1/4" TRS mic/guitar/line combos, stereo 1/4" TRS, stereo 3.5 mm TRS, stereo Bluetooth audio
FREQUENCY RESPONSE 40–20 kHz
MAX SPL 123dB
DRIVERS 6x 2.75" HF, 1x 10" LF
POWER OUTPUT 500 watts RMS/1,000 watts Peak
CABINET Polypropylene, with rubber surfaced handles and feet
GRILLES 1.2 mm steel
DIMENSIONS (Assembled) 16" D x 13.4" W x 79.5" H
WEIGHT Sub with cover, 30 lbs. Columns in bag, 13 lbs.

KUDOS Plenty of input options and power, onboard effects, able to link to a second unit. Rugged construction, good value
CONCERNS Could have better definition for vocal and acoustic performance

enclosure. The MLS1000 also comes with a nicely fitted padded cover that slips over the sub, with a flap for easy access to the handle, and a padded shoulder bag for the array pieces, all of which will be appreciated by anyone who regularly moves equipment.

Playing program music samples from an iPad showed the MLS1000 was a capable, full-range system. System DSP settings worked as expected, with the Standard and Live Band settings proving most useful for live performance. As expected, the Dance Music setting added significant bass, while the selection Speech rolled off bass in favor of mids to improve intelligibility. A Shure SM58 connected to channel 1 proved that the system (in DSP settings Standard and Live Band) did a good job of rendering vocal tonalities and intelligibility. Reverb was of reasonable quality, and the Mic setting on channels 1 and 2 offered plenty of headroom.

Confident that an acoustic guitar with built-in active electronics and vocal mic would work well, I set up the MLS1000 for an afternoon songwriter workshop and acoustic house concert. The system unpacked and set up quickly, and I connected a guitar, keyboard and vocal mic. Bluetooth made it possible for each artist to stream their recorded music between sets, and its connectivity could be locked out during the performances. In terms of volume and dispersion, the MLS1000 easily covered the room without getting too loud in the front seats or becoming lost in the back.

While other more pricey systems might offer better definition and tighter bass response to flatter vocal and acoustic performances, the MLS1000 fared well at our small venue, proving that it had plenty to offer, especially where price is a consideration. Packing plenty of useful features, more than enough volume for small venues and plenty of headroom to go farther, the MLS1000 delivers versatility and great sound that belie its budget-friendly price.

BLUES SPECIALS

BY LINDY FRALIN

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AERO INSTRUMENT

dBuz Cable and dBuzX Extender

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

Buzz killers: The dBuz cable and (below) the dBuzX extender

GROUND-NOISE ISSUES are so commonplace for guitarists that many of us just take them in stride, all while keeping one hand on our strings or bridge to squelch the buzz coming from our amp. Just think about that as you cast your eyes over Aero Instrument's dBuz cable and dBuzX extender and ask, "Do I need them?" If that incessant little albatross to your playing style is starting to get you down, and especially if it's plaguing your home recording efforts, dBuz can rid you of it as fast as you can swap cables.

The dBuz was invented by Larry J. Pollack of Aero Instrument in Hilo, Hawaii. He's best known for his high-end replacement pickups for guitar and bass, and he's also made custom amplifiers and other audio gear. Given his depth of audio engineering experience, the dBuz might be one of the simplest products Pollack has ever created, yet it's one with potentially universal appeal.

Ground noise varies with the venue in which you're playing, recording or rehearsing, but whether it's mild or extreme, it's almost always there to some degree, preying on humbuckers and single-coils alike. Pollack points out that, as a ground-noise solution, dBuz does nothing about common noises, including microphonics and those emanating from power supplies. But it does eliminate a whopping 99.9 percent of the irritating buzz that it's designed to kill, and can also provide shock prevention when used in a certain way (more of which below). As such, it's great at nullifying buzzes from poorly grounded or ungrounded bridges, poorly conducting aluminum bridges, plastic-coated strings, acoustic instruments, upright basses, many ground-loop issues and so on.

The dBuz Cable is a simple plug-and-play product that includes a standard high-quality guitar cable (available in 10-, 15- and 20-foot lengths) with quarter-inch jack plugs at either end and a dBuz sensor — the small coin-like brass disc — wired to a grounding circuit at the guitar/player end. It requires no soldering or modification of any kind to use: Just wedge the dBuz disc securely between the skin of your hip and the elastic waistband of your undershorts, and you have a constant, unbroken connection to ground. The dBuzX is essentially the same thing, but in a 2-foot "pigtail" with locking quarter-inch female jack at the far end, ideal for use with wireless systems or for those who prefer their existing full-length cables.

Each cables provides a big bonus feature, too: While you can leave your guitar's bridge ground wire connected for normal buzz-elimination use, if you do disconnect that wire, the dBuz system will provide current limiting to protect you from electrical shock when contacting a live mic or other gear.

Suffice to say it works very well. It's also fairly unobtrusive: Once the brass disc warmed up, I forgot it was there and encountered no issues or oddities of note whatsoever. It's a robustly made product — though obviously you'll want to handle the dBuz sensor and its connecting wire carefully — and all in all it's a beautifully thought-out solution to an issue that most guitarists have just gotten used to living with since the dawn of the amplified instrument.

SPECIFICATIONS

dBuz Cable and dBuzX Extender
CONTACT d-buz@aeroinstrument.com
PRICE $80 each, direct or at Aero dealers

BUILT USA

KUDOS A simple and clever solution to the age-old problem of ground noise
CONCERNS None, though be aware that the dBuz sensor's wiring requires careful handling

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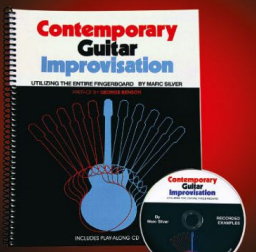

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Rick Springfield onstage at the Mill Run Theater, Niles, Illinois, September 6, 1981

How I Wrote...

"Jessie's Girl"

Rick Springfield bucks convention with his surprise 1981 chart-topper.

BY JOE BOSSO

"HONESTLY, I DIDN'T have any idea it would be a hit, let alone a song that has endured for decades," singer and guitarist Rick Springfield says about "Jessie's Girl," the pop-rock ear-candy smash from his 1981 album, *Working Class Dog*, that propelled him to international stardom. "When I wrote it, I thought it was a good album song, that was about it. When radio stations started playing it and it became this giant hit, I was as amazed as anybody."

MOOT SUIT

By the late '70s, the Australian-born Springfield had issued a couple of albums that failed to chart. After a move to L.A., he concentrated on acting while taking classes in stained glass with his friend Gary and Gary's girlfriend, who inspired this song's lyrics. Springfield can't recall the woman's name but says he dubbed his pal "Jessie" because the man had a T-shirt with football player Ron Jessie's name on it. While pop ballads and disco ruled radio at the time, he'd begun to hear more guitar music on the airwaves. "AC/DC and punk stuff like Elvis Costello was getting played," he says, "so I thought, Screw it. I'm going to write guitar-based songs that I like. We'll see what happens."

Inspired by his love of the Kinks' "You Really Got Me," Springfield started playing with an opening riff idea that sounded anthemic. "It had these big fat chords," he says, "but I knew I couldn't sing over it, because it's really hard to do that over crossing chords. That's when I wrote what became the first section."

Next, Springfield turned to another section he had originally written on the piano. "I noticed it was in the same key as the other song," he explains, "so I decided I could marry them and they would work." Once he had the basic structure down, he recorded a demo on his four-track machine. "I couldn't play drums, so I beat out a rhythm on a cushion and EQ'd it to make sound like a kick and a snare. I played a cheap bass that I got at a pawn shop. For distorted guitar, I used one of the original Pignose amps, and it sounded great."

Famously, "Jessie's Girl" is one of the rare instances in which the word *moot* is used as a rhyme: "You know I feel so dirty when they start talking cute/I wanna tell her that I love her, but the point is probably moot." Says Springfield, "I probably sent kids to the dictionary with that. I originally had a rhyme using *bathing suit*, but that was cliché."

THANK YOUR LOCAL DJ

Springfield played his demos for producer Keith Olsen, who was riding high on the charts with records for Foreigner, Fleetwood Mac and Pat Benatar, and he agreed to work with him. Sessions for the track went smoothly ("We did a couple of passes and had it down," Springfield said), with the arrangement staying close to the demo, except for the guitar solo. "I tried doing my own AC/DC-type solo, but it was a lot of noodling," he says. "Keith brought in Neil Giraldo, from Pat Benatar's band. Neil came up with a solo that was really musical and fit the vibe of the song perfectly. He was absolutely brilliant."

Olsen had always championed "Jessie's Girl" as a single, but neither Springfield nor his label, RCA, agreed. "I thought it might be too complicated for radio," Springfield says. "But then DJs started playing it and the phones rang. The DJs called the label and said, 'Might not be a bad idea to release this as a single.' That's when RCA jumped on it."

RESPECT

After waiting years for success, Springfield saw the stars align in the summer of 1981. Along with strong radio play, the video for "Jessie's Girl" became a mainstay on the newly launched MTV, and he quickly shot to household-name status thanks to his role as Dr. Noah Drake on the ABC daytime soap *General Hospital*, all of which helped drive the single to number one.

"It was crazy," Springfield says. "I went from nobody knowing me to being recognized everywhere. No matter what anyone says, you're not prepared for that." Over the years, "Jessie's Girl" has been featured in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights*, and Springfield took part in the video for Coheed and Cambria's tribute, "Jessie's Girl 2." "It's been great to see the song's evolution to respectability," he says. "It went from teen pop to people thinking that it had real substance. I can't complain."

"AC/DC AND PUNK STUFF LIKE ELVIS COSTELLO WAS GETTING PLAYED, SO I THOUGHT, SCREW IT. I'M GOING TO WRITE GUITAR-BASED SONGS THAT I LIKE. WE'LL SEE WHAT HAPPENS"

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